MEDIUMISTIC NOVEL

Herculaneum
(Roman Era)

DICTATED BY THE SPIRIT
JOHN WILMONT
EARL OF ROCHESTER

VERA KRYZHANOVSKAIA

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About the Medium

Vera Ivanovna Kryzhanovskaia, (Warsaw, July 14, 1861 - Tallinn, December 29, 1924), was a Russian psychographer medium. Between 1885 and 1917 she psychographed a hundred novels and short stories signed by the spirit of Rochester, believed by some to be John Wilmot, second Earl of Rochester. Among the best known are "The Pharaoh Mernephtah" and "The Iron Chancellor."

In addition to historical novels, in parallel the medium psychographed works with "occult-cosmological themes." E. V. Kharitonov, in his research essay, considered her the first woman representative of science fiction literature. During the fashion for occultism and esotericism, with the recent scientific discoveries and psychic experiences of European spiritualist circles, she attracted readers from the Russian "Silver Age" high society and the middle class in newspapers and press. Although he began along spiritualist lines, organizing séances in St. Petersburg, he later gravitated toward theosophical doctrines.

Her father died when Vera was just ten years old, which left the family in a difficult situation. In 1872 Vera was taken in by an educational charity for noble girls in St. Petersburg as a scholar, St. Catherine's School. However, the young girl's frail health and

financial difficulties prevented her from completing the course. In 1877 she was discharged and completed her education at home.

During this period, the spirit of the English poet JW Rochester (1647-1680), taking advantage of the young woman's mediumistic gifts, materialized, and proposed that she dedicate herself body and soul to the service of the Good and write under his direction. After this contact with the person who became her spiritual guide, Vera was cured of chronic tuberculosis, a serious illness at the time, without medical interference.

At the age of 18, he began to work in psychography. In 1880, on a trip to France, he successfully participated in a mediumistic séance. At that time, his contemporaries were surprised by his productivity, despite his poor health. His séances were attended at that time by famous European mediums, as well as by Prince Nicholas, the future Tsar Nicholas II of Russia.

In 1886, in Paris, her first work was made public, the historical novel "Episode of the life of Tiberius", published in French, (as well as her first works), in which the tendency for mystical themes was already noticeable. It is believed that the medium was influenced by the Spiritist Doctrine of Allan Kardec, the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, and the Occultism of Papus.

During this period of temporary residence in Paris, Vera psychographed a series of historical novels, such as "The Pharaoh Mernephtah", "The Abbey of the Benedictines", "The Romance of a Queen", "The Iron Chancellor of Ancient Egypt", "Herculaneum", "The Sign of Victory", "The Night of Saint Bartholomew", among others, which attracted public attention not only for the captivating themes, but also for the exciting plots. For the novel "The Iron Chancellor of Ancient Egypt," the French Academy of Sciences awarded him the title of "Officer of the French Academy," and in 1907, the Russian Academy of Sciences awarded him the "Honorable Mention" for the novel "Czech Luminaries."

About the Spiritual Author

John Wilmot Earl of Rochester, was born on April 1 or 10, 1647 (there is no record of the exact date). The son of Henry Wilmot and Anne (widow of Sir. Francis Henry Lee), Rochester resembled his father in physique and temperament, domineering and proud. Henry Wilmot had received the title of Earl because of his efforts to raise money in Germany to help King Charles I regain the throne after he was forced to leave England.

When his father died, Rochester was 11 years old and inherited the title of Earl, little inheritance, and honors.

Young J.W. Rochester grew up in Ditchley among drunkenness, theatrical intrigues, artificial friendships with professional poets, lust, brothels in Whetstone Park and the friendship of the king, whom he despised.

He had a vast culture, for the time: he mastered Latin and Greek, knew the classics, French and Italian, was the author of satirical poetry, highly appreciated in his time.

In 1661, at the age of 14, he left Wadham College, Oxford, with the degree of Master of Arts. He then left for the continent (France and Italy) and became an interesting figure: tall, slim, attractive, intelligent, charming, brilliant, subtle, educated, and modest, ideal characteristics to conquer the frivolous society of his time.

When he was not yet 20 years old, in January 1667, he married Elizabeth Mallet. Ten months later, drinking began to affect his character. He had four sons with Elizabeth and a daughter, in 1677, with the actress Elizabeth Barry.

Living the most different experiences, from fighting the Dutch navy on the high seas to being involved in crimes of death, Rochester's life followed paths of madness, sexual abuse, alcoholics, and charlatanism, in a period in which he acted as a "physician."

When Rochester was 30 years old, he writes to a former fellow adventurer that he was nearly blind, lame, and with little chance of ever seeing London again.

Quickly recovering, Rochester returns to London. Shortly thereafter, in agony, he set out on his last adventure: he called the curate Gilbert Burnet and dictated his recollections to him. In his last reflections, Rochester acknowledged having lived a wicked life, the end of which came slowly and painfully to him because of the venereal diseases that dominated him.

Earl of Rochester died on July 26, 1680. In the state of spirit, Rochester received the mission to work for the propagation of Spiritualism. After 200 years, through the medium Vera Kryzhanovskaia,

the automatism that characterized her made her hand trace words with dizzying speed and total unconsciousness of ideas. The narratives that were dictated to her denote a wide knowledge of ancestral life and customs and provide in their details such a local stamp and historical truth that the reader finds it hard not to recognize their authenticity. Rochester proves to dictate his historical-literary production, testifying that life unfolds to infinity in his indelible marks of spiritual memory, towards the light and the way of God. It seems impossible for a historian, however erudite, to study, simultaneously and in depth, times and environments as different as the Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman civilizations; as well as customs as dissimilar as those of the France of Louis XI to those of the Renaissance.

The subject matter of Rochester's work begins in Pharaonic Egypt, passes through Greco-Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages, and continues into the 19th century. In his novels, reality navigates in a fantastic current, in which the imaginary surpasses the limits of verisimilitude, making natural phenomena that oral tradition has taken care to perpetuate as supernatural.

Rochester's referential is full of content about customs, laws, ancestral mysteries and unfathomable facts of History, under a novelistic layer, where social and psychological aspects pass through the sensitive filter of his great imagination. Rochester's genre classification is hampered by his expansion into several categories: gothic horror with romance, family sagas, adventure and forays into the fantastic.

The number of editions of Rochester's works, spread over countless countries, is so large that it is not possible to have an idea of their magnitude, especially considering that, according to researchers, many of these works are unknown to the general public.

Several lovers of Rochester's novels carried out (and perhaps do carry out) searches in libraries in various countries, especially in Russia, to locate still unknown works. This can be seen in the prefaces transcribed in several works. Many of these works are finally available in Spanish thanks to the ***World Spiritist Institute.***

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PART ONE

I
The Visit

It was a radiant spring morning in the year of grace 79 (832 of Rome).

The sun, already burning bright, was casting rays of light on the bustling streets of the small, laughing city of Herculaneum, nestled like a pearl among emeralds in the midst of gardens and orchards as far as the mouths of Vesuvius.

Certainly, the elegant world of the city of Hercules was still asleep at that hour; but nevertheless, a certain movement could be noticed in all the streets.

Here, merchants of fruit, of crockery, of flowers, were rattling the air with their preaching; there, peasants were returning to the city gates with empty baskets; and there, magistrates, officials, slaves, were crossing in all directions.

Through this huddled crowd, a rich litter with beautiful inlays could be seen swinging on the shoulders of eight Cappadocians.

The suspended curtains allowed a glimpse inside, reclining on expensive cushions, of a beautiful woman in her twenties. Beautiful, indeed, of unusual beauty: the oval face with matte complexion had enough ebony hair to frame it, and to enliven it, a pair of large eyes, calm and severe at the same time.

However, the commissure of her lips, her thin, straight nose, with mobile nostrils, betrayed in her tranquil appearance the concomitance of burning passions, as well as unmeasured pride.

Simply dressed in white, the long veil characteristic of Roman patrician women hung from her head.

As the litter turned into a less busy street, it stopped in front of a better-looking house.

On the threshold of the half-open door was engraved this hospitable legend: *Salve!*

A gray-haired old man, whose clothes indicated that he was a trusted servant, was arguing with some florists who were showing him bizarre, polychrome baskets.

Upon noticing the newcomer, he rushed to the litter, exclaiming in reverent attitude:

- Welcome, noble Metela, and the blessing of the gods consecrate your every step.

- Good morning, Scopeliânus - replied to the young patrician with kindness. - Tell me, is the mistress up yet?

- The master has left, but the noble Virgília must be in the

cloakroom, since she was served lunch perhaps half an hour ago. May I accompany you there?

- No need. Continue with your duties, I'll go up alone. And as for you, - she added, turning to the porters - wait for me here.

Quickly, she crossed the lobby and the corridor, and climbed the staircase to the upper floor, where there were several small rooms and a large bathroom adorned with many statues. Two young slave girls were busy arranging clothes and perfume bottles.

When they saw their visitor, they immediately ran to kiss her clothes, and then, grabbing a rich curtain, they let her into Virgília's alcove.

This room, richly ornamented, communicated with a small terrace with a horizontal roof, adorned with rare plants and, at the same time, overshadowed by the branches of large trees from the garden. In this sort of shady and odorous trellis, a beautiful creature, surrounded by her slaves, was seated at a small table overflowing with cases, jars, and other toiletry utensils.

A few steps away, a squat little black woman on a woolen rug was playing with a months-old child.

- Good morning, dear Metela - exclaimed the owner of the house, rushing to meet the newcomer and hugging her effusively. - What a happy memory you have! I'm alone, as you see; Fábius has gone to the slave market, for we need some. But... sit down and let's talk while I finish dressing.

The wicker armchair was brought to her, the footstool was placed at her feet, and she was offered a glass of wine, which the kind visitor barely moistened her lips in.

At that moment, Virgília took her place at the dressing table, and all she did was gaze into the metal mirror, held up by a slave, while another put on her golden sandals.

This Virgília was also a delightful creature, so petite and delicate that she would not have been older than fourteen to sixteen.

Her fresh, rosy countenance, with childlike lines as it were, shone with joy and candor; however, her eyes, round as two blue beads, sparkled with intelligence and mischief, to prove a restless and dreamy soul.

Her hair was blonde, but of that auburn blonde so highly rated among Roman ladies. At that moment, two maids were barely trying to untangle her hair in order to comb it.

- What a good star brought you to town this morning. And how is Fabrícius Agripa? - she said - while she picked out a rich ring and put it on her finger.

- My husband is doing well and greets you; as for me, needing to get up early to attend the children's gymnastics, I took advantage of the coolness of the morning to take a walk and come personally to invite you to take part in our meeting this evening. Give us the pleasure of your presence with Márcus Fábius. A very intimate gathering, indeed. Senator Vérus with his wife, Semprônius and his son, Flávia Secunda and a few others, whom Fabrícius has invited in honor of his friend Serapião, who has just arrived from Rome bringing with him young Cláudius, a distinguished harpist and singer.

He will also be there, and we will have the opportunity to hear the most modern music and poetry in the capital.

- Delightful! - exclaimed Virgília, rubbing her hands together. - And I'm delighted to be able to talk to Cáius. He's so witty... And he's got an aplomb that reminds me of that head of support that's displayed in your "atrium". Then, Cáius is always a consummate artist, a gentleman, whether he's playing the lyre or plotting epigrams. Last year, on his trip to Rome, he took the prize in the chariot race, and it is said that Semprônius was very upset about it.

- It's true - replied Metela - Cáius is one of the most beautiful men we can imagine, but the truth is that he also shows some extravagant tendencies. They would rather take him for a gladiator than for the son of the opulent patrician Semprônius. Take, for example, the courtyard he had built, where he´s now taming and fighting with a tiger and a leopard.

Now, they say, he also wants to buy a lion to better cultivate his ostentatious courage. And as if all this were not enough, even now he's shaking the town with the scandal of his senseless passion for this Dafné, to the point of wanting to marry her.

- That's right. Just yesterday, Sextila, who lives in front of deTúlia s store, was here and told me that Cáius spends half the day there courting this woman! It's strange... to want to marry a poor and obscure plebeian, when he could choose among senators' daughters... Only, - he added with a certain vivacity, - I hope that Semprônius will never agree to such an adventure, despite his weak affection for his son.

- We'll see - obtained the other, smiling..., - But be that as it may, you alone are to blame for the risk that the Doudivan is running. Why didn't you accede to the old man's wish when he asked Fabrícius for your hand for his son? As your second mother, I also advised you, and you stubbornly refused.

Virgília turned around so abruptly that the mirror and the combs fell to the floor. Her face flaming, she immediately retorted:

- How can you talk like that? Are you joking? The other's mischievous smile spurred her on.

- Do you think there's a man in the world comparable to Márcus Fábius? Good as he's beautiful, forgiving as he's generous, his love reheats and strengthens, like the rays of the rising sun. The love of Cáius, impetuous, wild as himself, must asphyxiate and burn like the desert storms...

With their backs to the door, the two ladies have not noticed that, after a few minutes, the repostman had retreated and a slender young man had stood there listening to their lecture, with a smile on his lips. His thin, regular face exuded nobility and loyalty. Brown, ringed hair adorned his beautiful head, and his large, velvety eyes gazed at his wife with indefinable tenderness.

- Bravos! dear Metela... I'm delighted to see the futility of your efforts to steal Virgília's heart from me, for the sake of Cáius Lucílius... But be careful: any intrigue could incline me to revenge, and, in that case, I'll tell Fabrícius Agripa that the blonde Livia thinks she is unpardonable because he preferred her to a certain brunette patrician of my relations.

- Look how mean and spiteful Fábius wants to be! And I thought he was incapable of killing a mosquito without crying...

He said so, cordially shaking the young patrician's hand.

The latter sat down beside his wife, embraced her, and replied with a smile:

- Be disillusioned, I'm incapable of uselessly killing a mosquito, but I would not strangle a rival in cold blood.

- Then - replied Metela - it's convenient not to exacerbate your jealousy and let's consider the reasons for my visit, that is, to invite you to tonight's soiree. Serapião brought us Cláudius, and Cláudius will bring us music, which is interesting for an amateur of your stature.

- How did you manage in the market? - asked the petulant Virgília interrupting her husband, who was grateful and accepted the invitation - did you always find the slaves you need?

- Yes, I bought vigorous specimens, suitable for farming service; but, on the other hand, I also allowed myself to be charmed by a little boy of his twelve years of age and ended up buying him cheaply, because his taciturn appearance, his meanness and stubbornness made him repulsed and hated by everyone. When I took the time to question him, he refused to answer, and then they started beating him so savagely that I was moved and bought him. On the way, in his barbarian gibberish, he revealed to me that he's of Germanic origin, the son of some tribal chief. His name is Gundicar, and perhaps you could

use him for a little housework.

- I should be long gone by now - said Metela, - but what I've just heard arouses my curiosity and, by the way, I want to see this boy. Have him brought here to us, so that we can make sure that he really can be used for housework.

- Right away - answered Fábius and turning to one of the maids - Go and tell Próculus to bring the little slave here from the market lot.

The girl left hurriedly, and the conversation continued, wounding news of the Court and the city.

Shortly thereafter, a rustling of footsteps and a man's voice drew all eyes to the door. The curtain opened and Próculus, the abegão, emerged, grabbing a pale and frail little boy by the collar, despite all resistance. He kicked him vigorously, shouting:

- On your knees, animal! On your knees before your benefactors. - Turning to Fabius:

- Forgive me for daring to present you with such a rebellious slave, but rest assured that in a few days I'll have softened his spine and unclogged his ears.

The boy stood, arms folded, gauging the surroundings and those around him with a dark, arrogant look. He wasn't ugly: enough blond hair framed his bald face, but with regular lines; his big sparkling eyes revealed energy and courage, ready to face anything and win.

At the sight of that wretch, Virgília suddenly paled.

- No, absolutely not - she shuddered, - I don't want him by my side, his presence repels me; but where, dear gods, have I ever seen those eyes?

- It is indeed a very peculiar look - added Metela, - and I also seem to have seen it on the face of some statue. However, - she added compassionately, - he looks completely exhausted. Look at his deep pallor! We must feed him well and change his clothes right away.

She took a glass of wine and offered it to him. Gundicar took the glass and silently placed it on the table, near Virgília, while staring at her with a mixture of hate and admiration.

- By Jupiter! - exclaimed Márcus Fábius, laughing, - we would think that this little brute would like Virgília to offer him the wine... It can't be said that he has bad taste, but only that he doesn't appreciate your beauty, Oh Metela! ¨

- And it's up to me to console myself with the failure of the conquest - she answered in a humorous tone, while Virgília, already pleased and laughing, presented the glass to the little savage who, all wrapped up in a grateful look, emptied it in a gulp.

There was a general laugh.

- Take him away, Próculus, give him some clothes, give him a few days off, I don't want him mistreated.

- The boy promises, and you'll see that you've made a great acquisition - finished Metela as he said goodbye.

II
Father and son, mother and daughter

In a small, elegant bathing room, a tall, lean, muscular man stretched out on the large diva, while a squat slave wiped his feet to put on tall brown leather striking boots.

Another slave, standing, held up a small silver salver, a cup of aromatized wine that he had sometimes offered to his master without the latter, absorbed in deep the master who, absorbed in deep cogitations, didn't notice his insistent gestures.

This frowning personage, whose mouth and severe eyes indicated a firm and resolute character, even to the point of despotism, was Títus Bálbus Semprônius, a wealthy patrician and retired magistrate, residing in Herculaneum, where he owned much land and considerable property.

Evidently, at that moment, any distressing idea worried him.

Frowning, he smoothed his gray, brush-cut hair and, in an impatient voice, ordered him to get dressed quickly.

In ten minutes, he would leave the bathroom and stroll back and forth, with cadenced steps, through a gallery of colonnades.

A servant from over there pulled him out of his cogitations, announcing that the meal was ready.

Without saying a word, he went to the dining room, where a rich table was set with fine dishes and room for two diners.

The old patrician reclined on the divan, behind which sat the cupbearer and another slave, while the butler oversaw presenting the dishes, cutting the meat, and serving the master.

A young boy, kneeling by the divan, held the silver basin and the lacy napkin. Semprônius dipped his greasy fingers into the perfumed water and then stretched them out for the young slave to wipe them diligently.

- Did you call for Cáius Lucílius? - he asked suddenly, looking at his son's vacant seat.

- He's in the courtyard, amusing himself with the beasts - answered the butler.

Flácus called out to him three times, but he seemed to pay no attention.

The meal continued silently. The patrician ate well, drank better, and finally got up and made his way with a firm and graceful step to the rooms bordering the garden. Opening a heavy door, he entered a courtyard with high walls and at the end of which sat two large and

strong cages, containing a tiger and a leopard respectively. In the center of the courtyard stood a solar court, and red stone statues representing famous gladiators adorned the angles.

In front of the cages, in a recess in the wall, there was a marble bench, and beside it, a crystal clear, singing stream of water gushed from a lion's gullet into a pool.

On that bench, sitting in a bizarre attitude, looking unconcerned, was a young man in a white robe.

When he saw him, all the anger and severity of old Semprônius changed into a mixture of indulgence and paternal pride.

Besides, the truly seductive outward appearance of Cáius Lucílius could only justify would not fail to justify, to a certain extent, the moved tenderness of the austere old man.

A classic type with perfect lines, like a statue of Support, his broad chest and muscular arms indicated Herculean strength. His head, with outlines as clear as cameo carvings, was adorned with black and curly hair; but, despite such gifts, from his deep and lively eyes, as well as from the commissure of his lips, could be inferred a fiery temperament and audacity capable of bordering on recklessness.

As soon as he saw his father, he turned around sullenly and said to him

- You said you didn't want to see me until I changed my mind.... That's why I didn't come to you and didn't look for you again.

Semprônius sat down next to his son.

- I've come, not to scold you, but to speak to you with the voice of reason. You've always had in me a father who was indulgent and exclusively concerned with your happiness. How can you believe that I would want, on a mere whim, or out of pride, against your desires? I'm convinced that such a woman can only bring you misfortune, not because she is a commoner, - for it is certain that the man ennobles and elevates the woman to her social level, - because of this, Dafné is frivolous, rustic and bronchial, a daughter well worthy, in short of the shrew who bore her and brought her up.

This one, as you can hardly know, is a perfidious creature, with dark, even sinister antecedents. The life she led in Rome, nobody knows. And it is this woman who insinuates to her daughter to force your marriage, in order to blend in with our old and noble lineage.

Look, I want to believe that Dafné really loves you, but, vain and frivolous as I know her, I also believe that she would gladly become your mistress, if you give her money, jewels, carriages, servants... And I would also agree with that right away. But Túlia wants to excite your passion and finally force you to do something crazy.

- Maybe you're wrong, Father. So, this commoner can't possess the strict virtues of any virtuous patrician? Why? We know of cases of women of the people who would rather kill themselves than give in to an ignominious love. No, not at all; if you love me, as you say, you must give me permission to marry Dafné.

The old man stood up with a heavy frown:

- You don't want to listen to my advice... In this case, for your benefit, I refuse permission; but (putting his hand on her shoulder), I know the son I have, I know he won't disobey me, nor will he do anything that might tarnish the family traditions. These loves, son, are transient, like the heat of the day, which is invariably followed by the coolness of the nights. Knowing Túlia, you'll not attach yourself to Dafné. A faithful image of her mother, she is rapacious, false, intriguing, and loves you only because of the impossibility of possessing you.

Now, go to lunch and rest if you don't want to become thin and ugly. Tonight, we have an invitation to Fabrícius Agripa's house and that will distract you. Prepare yourself to accompany me accompany me this afternoon. And see you later....

- Are you leaving now? - asked Cáius, always irritated.

- No, but I need to receive some stewards who have just arrived from our planting and grazing fields. We must listen to them and examine their production. By the way, this morning they came to offer me four magnificent horses and I bought them for you. Do you want to accompany me to the stables and examine them?

- Right away, and hurry up - exclaimed the suddenly transformed young Cáius. - What a great idea, my father! We can try out these animals today and hitch them to my car to go to Agripa's house. You'll go with me, because it's always nicer than riding in a litter, at a slug's pace.

A faint smile came to Semprônius lips when he saw his son shut up about his courtship, so much so that he heard about horses.

They went through a long courtyard lined with stables and stables, from where the mooing and neighing of the newly arrived flock came, and stopped at the far end, near a water trough, where a score of slaves were busy unloading carts full of sacks of oats.

Your presence brought the work to a halt.

- Hurry up, Mômus, have the horses that were bought this morning brought here - said Cáius to the troop's foreman.

At a signal from the man pointing out on tablets the harvest measurement, some slaves rushed to the stables, and soon returned pulling four superb horses, so fiery that they were barely haltered by

two men.

- Splendid! - says the young man as he approaches a horse with a silver-white coat, rosy nostrils and a thick mane. The exfoliating animal neighed and brushed the ground. - His name will be Dafné - he said, stroking the noble animal's shiny back. - Thank you, Father, thank you very much!

He turned to Semprônius and kissed him on the cheek. The old man smiled, leaned close to his son's ear and whispered:

- Be content with this four-footed Dafné, and we'll be good friends... - And then, in a loud voice. - Now, I'll leave you, the stewards are waiting for me there.

He greeted his son with an affectionate gesture and left.

Hours after this interview, in a deserted street, two women remained seated on the threshold of a small perfume and flower store.

Through the half-open door, they could see shelves full of bottles, jars and jars of liquids and ointments, as well as, on the floor, large amphorae of oils and resins. At the back of the store, a small door led to the interior.

The oldest of the women looked about forty years old: her face was pale, vulgar, and she had a woolen scarf on her head and tied to her chin. She wore a brown suit, simple but clean. She was busy tying small packages of aromatic plants as she took them from a basket beside her.

The other was in fact a young woman of radiant beauty, with magnificent blond hair, an alabaster complexion, red lips, and two blue eyes, transparent with boldness.

She also carried a basket of plants on her knees, but instead of working, she entertained herself with the rich gold and ruby bracelet that adorned her arm.

Despite such delight, her face showed deep annoyance, so much so that she nervously bit her lips.

- Your ridiculous vigilance is beginning to annoy me - he said in a metallic voice - you don't leave me a minute alone with Cáius Lucílius, you don't allow me to hug him, not even as a token of gratitude for a gift like this... You must understand that I'm not a child, and that I love him and am happy to talk to him without witnesses. Then, of course, in your presence he will never be able to explain himself frankly, to tell me everything he feels and desires.

- Foolish - replied the other, - it's precisely because I know your frivolity that I keep an eye on your colloquies. If I neglected you for a minute, I'm sure the marriage would fall apart. You're the hungry calf that sees the tender grass and wants to devour it by any means

necessary. legitimate wife of Gaius. Then you won't have to pack weed anymore, and the haughty patrician women you now look upon with envy, lounging in gilded litters, will be intimate, as equals. The boy is mad with passion, precisely because he can't hold you in his arms or be alone with you. or be alone with you. Abrased in this love, he will grow pale and wither away, until the day the proud Semprônius bends his neck and comes to ask me to marry you. Only then will you recognize the good fruit of my prudence. And now that you know the reason for my behavior, stop your recriminations and take care not to lose the golden pommel before you've picked it.

Dafné was silent. Lips twitched, he continued to date the bracelet. Finally, raising his head, he said:

- Here comes Cláudius...

- Then, take off your bracelet and resume your work. Also, refrain from laughing and joking with him... This musician is becoming very assiduous; I suspect that you like him and there is no harm in that, but with him you must always be discreet.

- He's also a patrician and a handsome young man - said Dafné with that spirit of contradiction that was peculiar to him.

- That's right, but... without a penny; a poor devil who lives off the chords of his harp. You love luxury, wealth, so don't think of giving Cáius a rival. Let Cláudius drag my wing... What the hell! I'm not that old either, and no wonder there's a saying: "you win the daughter by corrupting the mother".

She took the handkerchief off her head, smoothed her hair and, taking a small box from the shelf, she took a pearl necklace from it and cinched it around her neck.

By now, a blond, insinuatingly handsome young man, accompanied by a slave carrying a harp adorned with flowers, was striding briskly across the threshold of the store.

- Good morning, Túlia! Good morning, Dafné! Come on, hurry up, give me some strong perfume. I just dropped by to perfume myself a little.

- Say what you prefer - stressed the girl with a charming smile. - Rose oil for the hair? Jasmine essence for the clothes, some carmine for the face and lips?

- For the face? It's good! - Thank the gods my cheeks are as flushed as yours... Not at all, just give me some essence for the clothes and tomorrow I'll be here to buy all the rest that I'm already lacking. Look, also have a box of sweets, because it seems to me that those little mouse teeth of yours need to chew good things...

He approached the mirror attached to the wall, elegantly adjusted

the rich amethyst clasp that held his toga, and left, greeting them with gallantry.

- Where will he go, thus formalized? Some party, maybe... - grumbled Túlia.

- Now... where is he going? He's going to the meeting at Fabrícius Agripa's house. Foebé, the maid of the opulent Sextila, who had her invitation, as well as Cláudius and other patricians, told me. Happy you're! They are going to enjoy themselves, listen to music, eat, drink, play... When will I be able to do the same? Mother, you're right, I really need to marry Cáius to be able to share in these parties, to have slave girls and a box at the circus, instead of being instead of being mixed up in the anonymous mass, which I hate.

Impatient, he walked around the store and stopped, bam-boom, in front of his mother.

- I'm going to lie down and get some sleep to kill time. I can't stand the fact that they're having fun over there, while I'm bored to death here.

And without waiting for an answer, she went to the back of the store, disappearing inside the house.

Túlia remained leaning over the table, all wrapped up in the thoughts that were working in her brain.

It wasn't long before that ordinary, apparently calm countenance was transfigured into a rictus of exquisite malice. Her eyes, usually deadly, sparkled with sharp, poisonous sparks, like those of serpents.

In the plenary of her conscience, the pictures of a distant past unfolded, when she herself dreamed of becoming a patrician and Semprônius destroyed her beautiful dream.

- Just so you know, proud despot - he growled deafly - that the moment for a rematch is here, after all... It's been a long wait, yes, but Julia is patient and forgets nothing. You did everything to prevent your brother Drúsus from marrying the commoner, but now the commoner's daughter will be your daughter-in-law, to break your pride.

Oh yes... I know my daughter well... she's the one who will collect your old debt to me...

III
The party

In front of Semprônius' house, a few slaves were keeping two impatient horse riders hitched to the carriage, neighing, and clawing at the ground.

Accompanied by his son, the old patrician appeared at last and cast a suspicious glance at the restless pair.

- Watch what you're going to do, Cáius... you might do badly with these little beasts. I've already arranged for two men to follow us, because prevention is always better than cure.

The boy stroked the silky fur of the beast, patted them on the neck and, jumping on the ride, grabbed the reins.

- Don't you trust this wrist? Well, for me, mastering these colts is child's play. Come on, let's go!

The slaves let go of their bridles, while the young man straightened the reins, with muscles and arms that seemed to be made of iron. The animals neighed, the harnesses rang, but they stayed put.

- Climb on without fear, father; trust me. Semprônius leant down and the boy loosened the reins. loosened the reins.

They left. They drove dizzily through the city streets, but the driver's firmness was such that he avoided common encounters and accidents in time, as if he were driving the most peaceful trailer. Quickly they went through a city gate and slid down the road that led to Agripa's vi sale, situated in the countryside.

- Above all, make sure you stay precisely at the entrance door, since our friends are waiting for us there - said Semprônius.

- Don't get uncomfortable - he replied, taking a path across the road, at the end of which the buildings of the vast farm surrounded by parks and gardens could be seen.

Old Semprônius had not been wrong. In front of the bronze gate leading to a courtyard shaded by centuries-old trees, a group of people were chatting and scanning the road.

- Here they come! But look, what kind of horses are those?

That was the exclamation of a handsome, close-cropped patrician, about thirty-five years old, whose bearing and manners betrayed his military rank.

Indeed, Fabrícius Agripa, - for it was he - had served his time in the army, but seriously wounded during the campaign, he had left the army to devote himself to the management of his, albeit opulent, fortune.

At that moment, his regular face, with its large, penetrating eyes,

expressed the sincerest cordiality and admiration at the sudden stop of the car, which before seemed to fly across the cobbled road, as if it had been stopped there and stuck to the ground by two steel wrists.

Applause erupted, all hands were outstretched to the newcomers, who pulled up smiling, expansive.

- Congratulations, Cáius! You really have the wrist of Hercules - said Agripa, shaking his hand. - I was offered this pair only yesterday, and I refused, because it seemed risky to trust such creatures... However, I see that you carry them like mosquitoes caught by a thread.

They opened the house, joined the other guests. Agripa led them through the superb "atrium", painted in bright colors and paved with red jasper and agate. From there they went to the reception hall and then to the large terrace with columns in a hemicycle.

In front of this terrace unfolded a flowery meadow, in the center of which a fountain squirted the silver lymph, which fell in multicolored droplets into the marble pool. A few richly dressed women and a dozen or so men gathered there, all of whom applauded and thanked Cláudius for the musical hearing he had just given them. As the new guests entered, all eyes turned to them. When it was Cáius' turn to greet Metela, she welcomed him as a householder, saying:

- Sit down here beside me, I'll have some refreshments served, for I see you I'll send them to serve you some refreshment.

And she rubbed her handkerchief over his sweaty face:

- But, the truth is, you've forgotten us! We haven't seen each other for a long time and the and the children are always asking about their great friend.

The boy settled himself comfortably in a chiseled bronze chair and, turning to the üiterlocutor, said laughingly and mischievously to her:

- Could it be that the beautiful sex of Herculaneum has become mute and discreet? Yet I'm reading in those eyes something that tells me you're not unaware of the reasons for my lack with friends... And what amazes me is that the ladies, even the most beautiful and noble ones, are relentless when it comes to satisfying your curiosity, to the point of sticking their fingers in other people's wounds...

A slave came up with the refreshments, while another approached the small table and, taking a beautiful garland of roses from a basket, tied the young patrician's forehead with it.

- Ah! - he said with a tender look - why didn't you keep a crown of thorns for me instead? Then, at least, I would see that you share my sorrows.

Metela brought to the face of the young man the Etruscan fan,

made of peacock feathers, with which he was playing, and said with a meaningful look:

- I'll have a crown of thorns woven to offer you, but when you betroth the one whom the whole city proclaims to be your bride.

- Perfidious that you're, Metela! - You know everything, and yet you ask me, with revolting ingenuity, what is the cause of my absence and of my despondency! Had I been crazy, and was it possible to see you like this, so jovial and, at the same time, worried about a mystery of conscience?

The noble lady pulled back her cloak in an abrupt gesture and fought back:

- If we should judge your grief by the color of your face, my dear Cáius, we should be more concerned by the blush than by the pallor... Could it be that you've even gone red? But, if so, the cause of your grief would really be, as they say, a source of artifice...

Such irony disconcerted him; he stood up, sulking, and went to Virgília, who, in her blue dress embroidered with roses, her hair speckled with pearls, laughing, had just climbed the steps of the terrace.

In the meantime, the austere Semprônius was surrounded by elderly and serious guests like himself, chatting politics and business. However, his old friend, Senator Vérus, had not missed an opportunity to ask confidentially who this Dafné was, whom the public whispered had bewitched his son.

- Cold-hearted, nothing but cold-hearted and boiler-hearted. - And then, quietly: - it's true that the boy is pouting, but you can count on my embargo. He'll kick up a fuss, and while he's kicking up a fuss, I'll buy him horses to distract him; as a last resort, I'll send him to Rome for two or three months, even though the separation will be painful for me.

Just then, someone caught the senator's eye. Semprônius meditated for a moment, and then, seeing Cláudius leaning alone on the balcony, he had a sudden idea. He approached the musician, took his arm, and they headed for the garden.

- Dear Cláudius, I've always noticed that your cheerful, playful temperament reacts favorably on Cáius, whose senseless passion for the commoner you're certainly not unaware of. Do you want to use this ascendant to convince the crazy man that love is a passing cloud? Prove to him with your example that you can love all women, but not all of them can be suitable wives... A boy like you'll have had many passions and amorous conquests, even if you don't yet have the resources to marry...

A rogue smile broke out on the boy's lips.

- I accept life as it is offered to me... Women know very well that I can't install them on my harp and they are content with my love, even without a hymen... Nevertheless, if you think I can be useful to Cáius, make use of me frankly.

- Very well, thank you very much. From tomorrow, you'll be living with us, and Cáius will rejoice in the company of a boy his own age. What I want is for you to entertain him. You can devise whatever amusements you like, as long as you keep him away from that little trollop. I don't need to tell you how grateful I'm.

- But, it is up to me to prove my appreciation, and believe me, I duly appreciate your generosity. I'll do everything I can to help our Cáius.

A handshake sealed the pact. They parted. Semprônius rejoined the Senator, who had loudly summoned him to a game of dice.

Cláudius, in his turn, went to the garden, where, under the shade of a thick frond of plane trees and laurel trees, stood a small temple consecrated to the household gods.

Whoever, at that moment, observed the calm and at the same time cynical physiognomy of that face flushed like the roses that adorned his forehead; those brown eyes full of softness, would suppose that all his thoughts were concentrated on some new song, or equivalent futility. However, such a judgment would be quite wrong. Underneath the modest and discreet appearances of that young artist, there throbbed the tendencies of a refined libertine. He had a passion for pomp, gambling, and women. And since he lacked the resources to satiate this passion, he lived by expedients, always in debt.

Semprônius' invitation was a scythe's cut to him. He would live in a very rich house, where he would be happy to live, lacking nothing more to provide for material needs.

But it wasn't a feeling of gratitude that hammered in his brain; it was an entire plan of domination, to exploit the generosity of the girl and the boundless inexperience of Cáius Lucílius, who was incapable of fighting and winning with him, in a plan of premeditated intrigues.

In this character of such a duplicitous character, so skilled in improvising a lavish existence with mediocre resources, the readers will recognize the richly gifted personality, but weakened by vices, who (at the time of the narrative - Tibérios' life episode) had been Marcus, the emperor's physician, and who was to reincarnate as Vilibald of Lanau, the ruined and intriguing knight, already described in a previously published work.

His machinations were suddenly cut short by Cáius Lucílius, who, jubilantly questioned him:

- What are you thinking? I even took you for a statue... Is it the Balbila flower shop? I was looking for you to propose something nice. Agripa allowed me to take a bath here and I'm really hot. Would you like to join me? A dip in the pool is enough to cool off, and in half an hour we'll be back in the salon without anyone noticing our absence.

When, an hour later, they reappeared, the guests were already ready to move on to the triclinium, where a sumptuous banquet would keep them there until the early hours of the morning.

One fine afternoon, a fortnight after this meeting, the two boys were together on a small terrace in Semprônius' house. Stretched out on the diva, surrounded by cushions, stood Cáius, whose appearance was quite impressive, showing a deep physical decline. On the other side of the small table, Cláudius, negligently reclining in an armchair, was sipping a glass of falernum, while at the same time sipping from a golden basket of fine sweets and dried fruit.

- Listen, Cáius - he finally said, breaking the silence - your father is alarmed, and just today he told me about you. Tell me, are you really sick, or are you just pretending to break his stubbornness? If so, the time is right, because Semprônius is convinced that this passion will eventually compromise your health.

Cáius stood up, eyes ablaze:

- What judgment do you make of me? Do you think I'm able to lose weight and waste away because of a woman? No, never! It's true that I love Dafné, and I feel the effect of the dissatisfaction of my desires, even more so because I'm used to fulfilling all my whims and fantasies. But, on the other hand, I would never do anything to deceive my father.

Nothing could be truer. From the cradle on, Semprônius' beloved son had always had every pampering and desire. If his mother adored him, his grandmother (Semprônius' mother, absent now) was truly crazy about him, and both slaves and servants knew that his wishes were final orders.

- I can't say that I'm ill, either - he continued, falling back on his pillows - but the fact is that I experience weakness, an irresistible fatigue, incapable of any exercise on foot, by car, or on horseback. And this since that party at Metela's house.

- Hum! - grumbled Cláudius, filling another cup. - Could it be that Dafné, or the old woman, has given you some bewitching drug to speed up the wedding? These are common cases, unfortunately...

- No, not, because I don't remember drinking anything there. Besides, the poor girl must be devastated, since we haven't seen each other for twelve days. The day before yesterday I sent her a basket of

flowers, but what good is that? Would you like to do me a favor?

- How could I not?

- Go there, tell him I'm sick, I can't go out, and give him this little box. It's a gold chain and an amulet she asked me for. Plus, these little tablets with some words of offertory. She can't read, but her mother will read them to her.

Cláudius emptied his cup and stood up.

- I'm going to carry out your orders right now, and I only ask that you allow me to make the "*toilette*" right here, so that I don't have the trouble and delay of getting to my room.

- That's exactly what I was going to propose to you and, besides, do me the favor of choosing, among the items you bought this morning, something that may please your Balbília, because I've a feeling you'll not fail to pass by her door. And I congratulate you, because the florist is really a wizard, has superb eyes and the taste to admire your musical talent, as much as your blond hair...

- Thanks a lot, and... see you later. In two hours here I'll bring you news.

Passing by the room next to the terrace, the emissary woke up a small boy who was sleeping on a mat next to the door and supplied himself with a mirror and some perfumes.

While the two boys were chatting, a procession of litter, five pack mules, and a few escort men were parading through the large courtyard of the estate.

At the first news of the motorcade, Semprônius himself had rushed to the aid of a respectable matron, who was trying to get down from her litter. After warmly embracing him, the distressed old woman looked around and immediately asked

- Cáius, where are you? Why haven't you come to wait for me?

- Simply because he's unaware of your arrival, my mother. I didn't tell her about your warning. He's been ill for about twelve days, and we have a lot to talk about. But I'll leave it for later when you've rested from your trip.

The old woman's face clouded with melancholy, for she had a true adoration for her grandson.

- Follow me to my room, son, tell me everything that's going on, otherwise, you know, I couldn't have any rest.

Silently, mother and son crossed the small inner courtyard and headed for the women's wing of the building located at the opposite corner. As they reached a richly decorated anteroom, Fábia sat back in a large armchair. Despite her advanced age, one could still see the vestiges of her admirable beauty, more than even in stature, she

remained unyielding under the weight of years. White, silky hair, big black eyes, he let it all go by, from his personality, that subtle enchantment that only an unblemished existence can give.

- Thank you, my son - she said as he took some refreshments from his hands - Send those people away, and while I'm resting here, tell me what's going on with our Cáius, because, as if I could read in your eyes, something serious is going on.

Semprônius took a chair and proceeded to briefly expound on the loves of Cáius, the marriage project, and finally, that inexplicable illness that made the active and playful boy an apathetic and indifferent being, even to his favorite amusements.

- When I wrote you about this flirtation with the commoner, I didn't want to alarm your spirit by adding that this Dafné is the daughter of Túlia, the wretched, vile Túlia who we suspect of causing Drúsus' blindness. Many years ago, we lost sight of her, and now, a few months ago, here she appears, established with a perfumery in M. Monius' building.

The old matron stood up, white with wax:

- And is the daughter of this woman he loves? But this is another case, we can't consent, ever. It's very true that we didn't have the proof of the crime, but who, if not Túlia, could have changed that ointment?

- Don't get carried away with these memories, my mother. First, we need to think about the boy. In order to distract him, I've arranged for a young man to keep him company, whom you must know, having seen him at Drúsus' house when you were in Rome: he's the harpist Cláudius.

- Ah, yes, I really wanted to talk to you about him, because he made repeated visits to your brother, who, by the way, esteems him. But the worst of it is that he has been able to win Drusila's heart and would like to marry her... Now, Drúsus, who, as you well know, has nothing to be proud of and, in his hours of deep melancholy, only delights in the music of Cláudius, seems to favor the plan; but I, for one, am opposed to it, for, although Cláudius is an honorable man, he's no match for a rich and noble girl like your niece. I made her see all this and she promised to heed me, on the only condition that we don't impose another bridegroom on her and let her stay with her father, to whom, by the nature of her evil, she becomes indispensable.

- Drusila is an excellent creature, and we'll think about her future - said Semprônius. - But, my mother, don't you think you're being too severe? Cláudius is a patrician and comes from a family that enjoys an excellent reputation. Besides, as the third son of a ruined family, he

couldn't help doing what he did, that is, making a living anyway.

- We'll come back to this, and for now, what we need to do is to take care of Cáius. Go away, let me settle down for a while. I'll go to him and, after I've spoken to him with an open heart, I'll give you my opinion and my advice.

IV

A past

Shortly after this interview, the old matron hurried through her grandson's quarters and stopped on the threshold of the terrace.

He lay there, head buried in his pillow, as if deeply asleep.

A cloud of sadness shaded Fábia's face as she gazed at the disfigured face of her idol.

She approached him gently, leaned over, and gazed at him with infinite tenderness. Then, tenderly, she ran her hand through his ringed hair and murmured softly

- Lazy...

The boy opened his eyes and, recognizing her, threw himself on her neck, covering her face with kisses.

- You, here? But how is this? Dad told me nothing; otherwise, I would have come to meet you.

He urged her to sit down, and placing a pillow at her feet, he bent down and kissed her hands, with tenderness.

The matron in turn girded him tenderly and asked:

- But why have I come to find you so disfigured and downcast? Semprônius has already spoken to me about you, and now, my son, I hope you'll open your heart to me so that I can comfort and advise you in this trance that is so upsetting and damaging to your health and youth.

He remained crestfallen, unable to fix his grandmother's large, lucid, penetrating eyes. He knew perfectly well that the woman of his passion could not fit into his family, and he also doubted that his rustic, rebellious, capricious ward would be able to stay properly in the manor house run by that venerable figure, whom he considered the symbol of the mother-of-the-family and glory of his lineage.

Nothing in this world, however, would make him confess that some of Túlia's indirect allusions sometimes broke his proud heart, as if they were burning lashings. "I know" - she once told him - "that you're dominated by your father and grandmother, that you have no will of your own, and that you'll only do what they allow you to do... and this is why I beg you to visit us as little as possible, making my poor daughter crazy..."

Although he knew how dear he was to his family, who satisfied his every whim, the idea that someone might consider him a nullity, an automaton, exacerbated him and further hindered his designs. In the light of that kind and tender look from his grandmother, he was ashamed of himself; and reclining his head on her lap, without daring

to look at her, he hesitated recalcitrantly:

- I know that Dafné isn't a woman who befits our lineage as a family member. I've stopped visiting her, and I no longer ask Papa for his consent for us to marry; but the truth is, I love her above all things, and I've promised to marry her. Conjure up this weakness and melancholy, I can don't thing, it isn't in my will. I only wish that you don't believe me capable of pretending to be ill because of a woman, no matter what she is. For me, there is no woman worthy of such attitudes, unworthy of a man-man...

- Calm down, son: - your grandmother would never presume in you, and of you, anything less than decorous, and I'm ready to re-educate this girl so that she may become worthy of the position you reserve for her. Before a final resolution is made, however, allow me to give you the biography of Túlia, who, in my opinion, played an infamous part in the life of your unfortunate uncle. And I've a feeling that this woman's daughter will be a disaster for you; but if, after hearing me, you're not willing or able to give up, I undertake to convince your father, since your life and health are worth more to us than all the prejudices of this world.

The boy adjusted the cushions so that his grandmother could sit better, put a footstool at her feet, and, resuming his seat, concentrated all his ears:

- Some twenty years ago - she began saying - Túlia was a splendid woman, slender, elegant even, with a fair complexion and plenty of blond hair.

To me, however, those blue eyes were repulsive, as treacherous, and cold as they looked. She lived here in Herculaneum with her father, an old cloth merchant named Túlius Enceládus.

At that time, your father was already married as a second wife and you were only two years old, but your uncle Drúsus was single and lived with us. On one occasion, while trying to acquire many farms for the linen of his slaves and ours, Drúsus had the opportunity to see Julia and fell in love with her. I've never tried to find out what the nature of their relationship was, because Drúsus always kept to himself. Only one day did he explode... he was determined to get married! Your father, who had an irresistible aversion for the girl, lost his head; and since he had a great influence over his brother, he immediately tried to dissuade him.

Moreover, Semprônius' impulsive genius soon led him to nip the evil in the bud. He went to Túlia's house demanding that she gives up this disproportionate union, which could only be fateful for her, and assuring her that she would never be welcomed in the patrician

circles, and even he would not recognize her as his sister-in-law. In spite of everything, arguments and threats, Túlia revealed herself to be of incredible tenacity, declaring that nothing in the world would be able to stop her. Her father went to the height of indignation and, taking advantage of his strong hold over his brother, demanded that he accompany him to Rome on a trip planned for the near future. Drúsus dodged the question, stayed, but said no more about marriage. Your father had to leave alone, with relations with your uncle almost broken off. This was a very painful phase in our lives, for your mother and me. On the one hand, the deep sadness of your uncle; on the other hand, the irascible temper of your father... He wrote to me from Rome saying that his friend Flávius Sabínus had to leave on a business trip and, his wife having died, he asked me to keep his only daughter at my home for a few months. I gladly agreed, and shortly afterwards your father returned accompanied by young Sabina, who was truly one of the most beautiful and gentle creatures I've ever met. Everyone at home loved her, and even your uncle was delighted to talk to her, for Sabina wasn't only fascinating but also learned. These talks became longer, more frequent, more intimate, as the visits to Julia became fewer and farther between, until one evening I went to surprise the young couple on the terrace, both still moved by the presumed declaration they had made, her head resting on his shoulder. Drúsus blushed as soon as he saw me and taking the young girl by the hand he made his way to my side, saying: - "Mammy, here I present to you a daughter whom I'm sure you'll welcome with joy." For the only answer, I concurred to his heart.

Happy, radiant with joy, we hastened the wedding trousseau, after which the bride and groom were to go to Rome to live in the company of Flávius Sabínus, who, not having any children, intended to entrust Drúsus with the administration of his property.

I don't know what Julia thought about all this, but the truth is that we all thought she was resigned, at least in appearance. The wedding took place noisily, pompously, but the very next day we were struck by misfortune.

At this point, I must say that Drúsus had recently suffered from conjunctivitis that had caused part of his eyelashes to wax, and the doctor had prescribed an appointment to rub his eyelids. Well, the day after the wedding, when Drúsus was in the dressing room, we heard a horrible scream and Sabina and Semprônius, who were the first to help him, found him lying on the floor and fainted. An old slave from his private service, who was trembling all over, was trying to help him and could say nothing of what had happened. When he

came to, Drúsus explained that he had, as usual, rubbed his pupils when, a few moments later, he felt an atrocious pain, as if a fire dart had pierced his eyes and brain. He could remember nothing else. And the truth is, he was blind. When the doctor was called, it turned out that the ointment had been replaced with one of absolutely similar appearance but containing a violent and corrosive toxin that was enough to destroy my poor Drúsus' eyesight irretrievably.

Imagine our despair... A thousand conjectures were made about the perpetrator of the crime, more inconceivable since your uncle was well-liked and loved by everyone.

Only she, Túlia, could harbor feelings of vengeance against him.

The suspicion was general, it was unanimous, but, unfortunately, there was no proof.

Unhappy with such a misfortune, Drúsus went on to Rome accompanied by his young wife, who was his true guardian angel in her dedication, affection, and kindness. A few months later, Túlia married a perfumer and moved away. Then, much later, we learned that she was living in Rome.

Despite his blindness, my poor Drúsus could still be relatively happy, if an equally strange mysterious death had not taken his wife from him.

She had just had Drusila when one morning she was found dead! And bitten by a serpent! Where could that serpent have come from? Who could have intruded into the birthing woman's room? This is what remained shrouded in the folds of mystery... But the truth is that a certain woman recommended to Sabina to assist her during her pregnancy, claiming to be an excellent midwife, ended up disappearing without a trace of whereabouts... And no one can convince me that Túlia didn't share in this second attempt to take revenge on the unfortunate Drúsus, who, blind and abandoned, should, in her opinion, end up mad.

It was a distant relative of Sabínus who took it upon herself to raise the little orphan, since I couldn't, in turn, abandon you also recently orphaned.

He sighed long and deeply.

Cáius Lucílius had listened to everything with liveliness and interest. After a short silence, he said:

- But in spite of everything, there is no concrete proof of Túlia's guilt. And even if she had done so, that would be one more reason to drag Dafné into such a baleful maternal influence. She is only eighteen years old, and it is unbelievable that she is already infected with the maternal virus. And another thing, Granny: shouldn't we fear that

my speechlessness will also result in blindness? The skillful hand that destroyed Uncle's sight, may also find its way into my eyes...

Fábia shuddered and, in a gesture of tenderness and emotion, covered her grandson's eyes with her hands.

- May the gods preserve us from such a misfortune? Look, I'm going to talk to your father. See you later, son...

*

* *

As he left Semprônius' house humming a song, Cláudius walked down one of the streets leading to the marketplace. In front of a porch protected by a canvas awning, he stopped. There, among the rare plants, branches and flowering baskets, a beautiful girl was busy making a garland, all absorbed in her task.

- Good morning. Balbília... Who and what do you dream of, thus immersed among your pink sisters?

Blushing and moved, the beautiful flower girl jumped up from her footstool.

- At last, you devil! For two days now, I've been spending my eyes spying on the deserted street. I thought you had forgotten me, ingrate...

- I hope you'll soon regret these suspicions - he said laughing - but look, can't we talk a little more freely? Well, you see, we're not very comfortable here.

- Come here...

She opened a small door in the wall and led him through two dark and narrow rooms, then a corridor leading to the walled inner courtyard. Beds and flowerbeds decorated with plants and flowers occupied the center, where a stream of water spurted from a stone basin.

- Sit here, my naughty boy - said the girl, leading him under a thick trellis, close to the wall of the house, - while I send Agra to the market, and bring you some nice refreshments... Then... we'll talk freely, because Dad has gone to the big garden and won't be back before evening.

She went away, and in fact soon returned, bringing a jug of wine, an alabaster cup, and a basket of cakes. Depositing the snack on the side table, she filled the cup and said pleasantly:

- Drink up! It's the best booze Dad reserves for his friends.... I know how to replace it in the vat with a less precious one, without either of us noticing.

The musician tied her around the waist and raised the glass:

- To your health and our love, Balbília!

- Oh - she answered sighing, playing with her blonde locks - when will the gods consecrate our love and give you the means to marry me? If only I had the courage to confess everything to Dad, and maybe everything could be arranged, because I know that he's very rich, and I'm an only child... But I also know that he would get angry, he would hit me with sticks and stones, since he hates the patricians, calls them a bunch of proud people and says that running away from business with them is the same as running away from being treated like a dog. In addition, he's thinking of marrying Publius, the young gardener in the park, whom he regards as his son.

Cláudius was puzzled by the loquaciousness.

- Why do you worry so much about sad things? - and then insidious: - Just be patient, keep quiet about our love for a while, and everything else will be fine... Now, look what I've brought you here.

He took from under his cloak a parcel wrapped in a silk handkerchief and deposited it in the girl's lap, who immediately opened it curiously and eagerly:

- Ah! what a beauty! - she exclaimed, taking out some golden sandals, a richly framed metal mirror, and a chiseled and turquoise-studded silver flask, hanging from a gold cord.

- Thank you, dear Cláudius... - And she rubbed her hands together with delight.

Then, reaching for his neck:

- How can you speak of poverty when you buy me such expensive presents?

He smiled embarrassed, and replied:

- If I tell you that I'm poor, you must understand that it is a matter of relative poverty, that is to say, for a man of my condition, what I own isn't enough, which doesn't mean that I don't have enough left over to give my little Balbiliazinha...

Would she be able to confess that those precious gifts came from the generosity of Cáius Lucílius? Or was he not too stingy to enjoy, before that naive creature, the reputation of a detached man, superior to his own condition?

Half an hour of banal conversation later, he stood up:

- Now, there is no remedy but to leave you, for I still have one task left to accomplish. Cáius is ill, and he has asked me to bring Dafné some treats and a rich bouquet of flowers, which he will provide me with.

They went to the store, and Balbilia chose a bouquet of red roses, held together by a ruby of auburn cambium.

- Here it is: ruby and ruby roses like the passion of the beautiful Cáius - she said, smiling.

- And, I think, you can pay me double, because the heir of the opulent Semprônius isn't going to be shy in these things of love...

- But, of course - answered Cláudius, as he placed a gold coin in the shield.

He greeted the young woman and left. On the way, wrapping his lips around a subtle smile, cynical and mocking, he murmured: You foolish creature... you really think I'm capable of marrying her... I'm not saying that I wouldn't be suitable for a... mistress, but... as the wife of the patrician Cláudius, no, never! That's a fine-toothed trick I'll reserve for the heiress of the very rich Drúsus, provided the infernal divinities don't ruin my plans.

Engrossed in these future projects, he even went beyond the perfumery.

When he noticed the distraction, he turned on his heels, mounted the steps of the store, and peeked inside. Túlia was there, alone, worried, counting and stacking coins. And she had such an expression of ferocity that the young man couldn't help but be surprised.

- Good morning - he exclaimed, standing in the doorway. The woman stood up suddenly.

- Welcome and tell me what winds bring you here.

- I've come from Cáius. Where is Dafné?

- Look, come here and see if you can talk some sense into her - she said, opening the back door.

Dafné was lying on a sofa, face to the wall. She was trembling and sobbing, convulsively; her hands were clawing at her hair, and she was a perfect raging animal.

- Crazy girl, don't mistreat your hairy treasure like that - cried her mother. - Look who's here, it's Cláudius, and he's bringing news from Cáius... He hasn't forgotten you, you hear? He's just sick.

Hearing this, the girl calmed down. Her untidy dress revealed her breasts; her unkempt hair falling across her face looked like a lion's mane; her dull eyes let some of the pearls of her anger run down her cheeks.

- Beast, what good would a good whipping do you now - thought Cláudius, as he gazed with disgust at this display of amorous stupidity.

However, prudent enough to keep silent about an opinion that could harm him in the future, should Cáius have this fury in his spouse, he limited himself to exclaiming with feigned but affectionate compassion:

- Poor Dafné, wipe away those tears, console yourself; he's ill, it is true, but he sent me to greet you and bring you these tablets written in his own hand: more, still, this case with a regal crumb.

She threw herself into the wrapping, undid it in three moments, and took out the contents, identical to those of Balbília. Then she took a mirror and began to paddle in it, with the cord already tied around her neck. He smoothed his hair and said, turning to Túlia:

- My throat is dry, give me some refreshment. As soon as the door closed behind Túlia, she glared at the young musician, who had settled down on the footstool.

- Thank you for the good news. I thought it was all over, but now I'm overjoyed, as you see.

This, she said, frantically embracing and kissing the young patrician on the lips.

Despite a fleeting surprise, Cláudius was depraved enough to stop repelling the advances of a beautiful woman. Caress for caress, he responded to her transports, effusive as well.

- I hope, Dafné, that when you become rich and patrician, you'll not refuse me your caresses, because only love could inspire this gesture of recognition for my work.

- So? I like it too, and I'll help you, provided that I've the purse of Cáius, that stupid who lets himself be ruled by the whole world. If he had a little energy, we would have been married long ago, instead of making me the laughingstock of the neighbors... Ah, but I can also assure you that he doesn't lose hope.

And she clenched her fists in threatening fashion. Footsteps were heard, she detached herself from Cláudius' arms and dissimulated as if examining a jar.

- The tablets? - asked Túlia, handing her daughter a cup, which was soon emptied with greed.

Cláudius handed them to her, and she read: "Cáius Lucílius, to Dafné, sends a tender greeting and prays to Eros to protect and preserve her in good health, for the greater glory of his love."

- But, it is very kind what he writes! What a pity that I can't read... But I'll keep this message safe.

Túlia thought that illiteracy was a secondary consideration, and the essential thing would be to keep this memory well, while enclosing it in the little box.

Cláudius stood up.

- What do you want me to say to Cáius? - and underlining the phrase with a smiling irony: - Do you want me to give him a burning kiss?

She blushed, and her mother intervened with a shake of her head:

- That has no place... Look, take a rose from that bouquet, kiss it and send it to her as a sign of your...

A loud noise in the store didn't allow her to finish. She left in a hurry.

Dafné did as she had told him, took a rose, kissed it and handing it to the musician, said with expressive eyes

- Come back soon, my gentle messenger of Eros, and believe that you'll always be well received....

Cláudius squeezed her hand and whispered in her ear:

- Look, the bouquet is mine.... keep it secret.

V
The Groom

Fifteen minutes after Cláudius had left, a shout from the store interrupted Dafné, who was so busy contemplating and tasting the gifts now spread out on the small table beside her.

- Mom is arguing with someone whose voice isn't unfamiliar to me... who could it be? - She stood up, curious, opened the little door and let out a muffled cry.

Standing in the store was a tall, thin man with a hard, energetic face. He had placed a large parcel on a chair and was talking animatedly to his mother, who, disturbed and distressed, could hardly disguise her annoyance.

- Rutuba! You've discovered us after all - she exclaimed, walking towards him.

- Yes, but what I find strange is that your mother came without communicating with me. You could, I guess, have waited for my return, sparing me this absence of more than a year. But this is of little importance now. My uncle passed away leaving me a beautiful vineyard farm. Now, I've plenty to live on, and I've come only to claim the hand of wife that your parents promised me three years ago. As for you, Dafné, I know you haven't forgotten.

- All this is true, my dear Rutuba - said Julia in a honeyed tone - your fidelity can only honor you. Come with me inside so that we can explain ourselves better, and you, Dafné, stay here to attend to the parish.

Pale, frowning, without a single objection, the young man went into the inner room. His first glance was at the little table cluttered with precious trinkets and useless sayings, causing him to smile bitterly sarcastically. Túlia, rather smug, took out of the cupboard a bottle of wine, bread, and meat, which she placed on the table, after haphazardly shoving those compromising objects into the canasta.

- You must be tired due to your trip - he continued, pretending to be kind - and while you eat, I'll tell you what happens, like someone who confesses to a friend...

Rutuba took a swallow of her drink and, without touching the rest, leaned against the table, staring at her with severe and penetrating eyes.

- I can already see that you no longer want me for your son-in-law. It's intuitive, you don't need to tell me. All that remains is to find out the reasons for this resolution...

She tapped him affably on the shoulder.

- My dear Rutuba, an unforeseen fortune is coming for my Dafné's future, imagine that Cáius Lucílius, nephew of that opulent Drúsus you know, is in love with my daughter and promises to marry her. He told me himself that he's only waiting for the father's consent.

- And he won't lose by waiting - said Rutuba ironically - for I know the haughty Semprônius and I know that he will never consent to a plebeian graft in his lineage, unless he has changed, that is, is no longer the same man who prevented Drúsus' liaison with a plebeian equally greedy for fortune and greatness.

The flower girl's eyes fusilladed with hatred.

- I'ven't told you yet that Cáius is undoubtedly the most beautiful man in Herculaneum, and that Dafné loves him madly.

Greenish livor covered the young Roman's cheeks, lighting up his gaze with strange glows.

- Dafné loves him? and I thought that your mad ambition was the sole cause of all this! But in that case, there's nothing left for me to do here. Of course, I can't stop your daughter from marrying a patrician.

But why come back so soon? Calm down...

I don't intend to go back to Rome, I don't want La to laugh at me, for seeing me without my promised wife. I'll manage to put myself right here, to contemplate, even if from afar, the noble patrician Dafné.

Hearing these words, the girl who was peeking behind the door experienced a lively uneasiness. Did she have the feeling that the disowned fiancé might compromise her before Cáius Lucílius?

She knew the energetic character of the boy, whose look had stopped more than one of her fits of rage. Leviathan and cupid, she had always allowed herself to be wooed by the gifts Rutuba offered her, and she responded to them as she would to any good-looking man she came across. But, as soon as she sensed in him an authoritarian husband, her enthusiasm grew cold. For the rest, having already experienced the corrosive effect of the munificence of Cáius, only contempt and indifference caused her what had once been a cause for joy.

Rutuba, for her part, and much more than she could presume, had studied his character; she knew his fierce selfishness, his levity, his cupidity; she knew that that mouth of red lips was always ready to bite the hand that intended to caress her. Still, he loved her beauty with its impeccable lines, that hair of fawn gold, those deep, living eyes... He dreamed, he desired to possess her, and at the same time he hoped to subdue her tiger-like malice with a whip, when the

resources of moral influence failed him.

Dafné was right, fearing the possible revenge of that man doubly offended, in his self-love and passion.

For this reason, giving her face an expression of lively sorrow, she entered the room and, wringing her hands, exclaimed mournfully

- Rutuba, my dear and faithful friend! I mourn your loss, believe me; and never as at this moment have, I experienced the reality of our love. No man can I love as I love you, but... what can I do? Mom wants it that way. In exchange, when I'm powerful and rich, I'll fill you with gold and other gifts...

Mie stared at her firmly and coldly, then, taking hold of her arm, shook her:

- Don't lie, don't stoop to wrenching tears from dry eyes. I know you, and I know what made me love you: it was your plastic beauty, and not your hypocritical and ungrateful soul, only capable of loving people for the goods they possess. The gifts, which I saw here just now, should really make me superfluous... At this moment, you're trembling at the thought of me going before Cáius Lucílius and denouncing the gifts of your character. Calm down, though, because to foil this plan of yours would be, for me, only a minimum of revenge... Look, marry Semprônius' son, but be careful not to reveal the depths of your soul to him in those fits of rage when you roll over and tear your clothes off like crazy, tearing your clothes off and furiously biting that poor old slave, the only being that the gods have allowed you to torment until today...

Go away as you're, rude, vulgar, impulsive; meddle in the family of the austere Semprônius and of the impolite Fábia... but don't forget that these people have different honors than ours. I know, my chaste Dafné, how much you like to embrace the first boy you meet, as much as you can. For there, such things are never tolerated, and the day that Cáius Lucílius discovers any villainy in you, you'll be thrown out with a whip. And that, then, will be my only revenge, a revenge that will come, that will inevitably come, because you're unable to master the vicious passions that eat away at your soul.

Livid, mute, stupefied, the two women listened to everything without protest. Rutuba measured them from top to bottom, disgusted:

- Are you amazed at the knowledge I've of my former fiancée? If so, I also hope that she will still have the chance to admire my wit, until she regrets not having accepted the commoner husband who knew and welcomed her as she was...

He laughed and stormed out, slamming the door.

Túlia raised her head and, searching her daughter's eyes, still confused and dismayed, said gravely:

- This man is a dangerous enemy, cunning as well as daring; so be careful, try to be wise and faithful, leave this thing of dating everyone. Cáius Lucílius is handsome and generous, but I've also seen flashes of lightning in his eyes that indicate that he's impulsive, capable, in defiance of his offended feelings, of becoming as cruel as the beasts he's so pleased to tame. Violent men like calm women, and he has always lived among patrician women jealous of their dignity, like Fábia, Metela, Virgília, etc. Don´t reveal yourself to him unless you can become a kind, obedient wife.

For my part, I say that the marriage is viable, but it is up to you to assure the advantages of it, keeping yourself in the position you've conquered without giving any reason to Rutuba, who, by the way, still has it. Your identification, the domestic communion with Cáius is so troublesome and risky that I would have embargoed the bidding by myself, if with it I didn't intend to avenge the old offense of Drúsus and Semprônius...

- Ah - exclaimed the girl - do you want to immolate me to your revenge, and poison my pleasures and my dreams for the future?

She burst into sobs, threw herself on the bed, and spewed a torrent of curses and recriminations at her mother.

VI
Tiberius' cameo

In a small inner courtyard of the house of Márcus Fábius, which communicated with the corridor near the stairs, there were cries and shouts.

A crowd of slaves pressed around the steward, who was holding the little Gundicar by the shoulders, while a woman with her hands at her side shouted in a stentorian voice:

- Scoundrel! He must be hung or beaten to death. Yesterday morning, the mistress took the cameo out of its case and placed it on the dressing table. She was holding it when this rascal came out on the terrace with a message from his boss, and I couldn't help but notice the greed in his eyes, staring at the jewel. Today, the cameo hasn't appeared: I've rummaged through it, I've turned everything, drawers, filing cabinets, and... nothing!

- Confess, animal, where you put the theft, or I'll throttle you right here - said the steward, shaking the young boy violently.

Forehead frowning, lips clenched, cadaverously livid, the teenager let himself be beaten and mistreated without a groan.

- You bastard! Only you could have stolen the jewel... Will you shut up? Well, I'm going to untie your tongue...

The whip snaked through the air and cracked on the small man's back in frantic, violent licks. He squatted, crossing his arms, but always mute. With each stroke, his shirt was stained with blood, and the steward became more and more exacerbated, repeating

- Confess, damn you, or I'll kill you.

At that moment, Virgília came to the door of the corridor. She was returning from her usual walk, accompanied by her nanny and her little son, when she was attracted by the commotion. Upon seeing this spectacle and noticing the bloody little boy, she paled and asked:

- What did he do to be punished like that?

- Madam - exclaimed the maid - the cameo is gone, and yesterday, when you were holding it, Gundicar went to the terrace and saw it... I swear he stole it, and now he won't say where he hid it.

Virgília walked away without saying a word and went up the stairs with a heavy frown. Any other slave so cruelly scourged would have aroused her sympathy and indult; this boy, however, was hateful to her by his voice, by his look, by everything, which she felt but could not define.

As for Tiberius' cameo, she also hated it, although it was a precious relic that the Empress Plantia Urgalanila had given to Márcus Fábius'

grandmother. The admirable stone, which represented Tibérios' handsome and haughty stature as a young man, surrounded by superb rubies and hanging from a gold chain, was a medallion, only faded on one side, as if it had suffered the action of fire. There were different versions about the origin of this jewel, which, they said, the tyrant never failed to take with him; some said, mockingly, that it was an excess of self-patriation; others that it was superstition, and finally those who considered in the imperial fetishism a simple memory of a be loved woman.

True or not, these legends had caused Virgília to deeply dislike the precious medallion, to the point that she never used it.

She had hardly turned her back on the depressing and barbaric spectacle when, at the other end of the courtyard, a door opened to give way to Márcus Fábius.

The noble patrician stood there surprised, blushing, and exclaimed:

- What is this? What has the boy done to be punished like this? You, Próculus, you know very well that no slave can be punished without my order.

At the timbre of that voice, vehement and loud at the same time, everyone recoiled in astonishment. The patrician ran to the ever-shrinking Gundiear, and, putting his hand through his matted hair, asked compassionately:

- What have you done? speak without fear....

The boy raised his eyes in astonishment, but, unable to speak, he collapsed fainting on the tile, and, uncrossing his arms, left the cameo chain on his chest.

- He stole it! Look! - exclaimed the maid and the steward, pointing to the jewel.

Fábius looked at the bloody little boy with a look of deep compassion.

- They should have reported the offense to me and waited for my decision. Próculus, go pass on your job to Grácus, since I don't want any overseers who are more in charge than I'm; and as for you, Rufila, don't report the matter to the overseers again before you hear from your mistress. And you, who are there, take the boy and tell Scopelânius to give him a bath and a good bed, while I'll take care of the rest. Rufila, is the mistress back yet?

- Yes, sir - said Próculus - she was here, she wanted to know what was wrong, and she didn't stop the punishment...

That, he said with a disconsolate expression, already cowed by the sentence of her dismissal.

Faced with this information, the young man blushed and turned pale. He took the cameo that a slave presented to him and, abruptly leaving, hurried to Virgília's chambers.

As he crossed the alcove, he threw the wicked object on the table and broke onto the terrace to lean against the balustrade without looking at his wife reclining on the diva.

She stood up uneasily. If her husband was doing this, it was because he was upset. It was obvious, she knew his genius.

- Fábius, come here... And he, mute, motionless!

She turned red, stared at him in aggravation and surprise. Then Márcus Fábius said to her, calmly, but without turning his face away:

- As I was passing through the courtyard, I saw the barbaric punishment inflicted on little Gundicar, and there I was told that the "lady" had also seen it and hadn't stopped the iniquitous execution... What judgment can I make of your heart? You, young and sensitive; you, who are a mother, should, in my opinion, abhor all cruelty, and you watch the torture of a helpless and defenseless creature yet, you contemplate a child cut down and bled for stealing a cheap object from an unworthy tyrant, and you go on your way without a word, without stopping anything! I confess, I never expected you to behave in such a way...

Virgília sat on the diva, eyes bright, face flushed, and said:

- I hate that boy, and I think, simply, that he deserved his punishment, for what belongs to me can't be stolen, whatever it is and whatever its origin and nature.

Márcus Fábius turned and walked towards her.

- For are you not ashamed to hate such a wretched being, without family, without position, without freedom? Loved and cherished among his own, as much as our little children are among us, the misfortunes of war have made him a prisoner, and for this reason alone, should he be treated worse than an animal?

As for me, I have always considered it an indignity to hate and despise creatures subject to my rule. Contempt and hatred should be reserved for those of our own condition. Certainly, this child deserved punishment, which could have been, for example, binding him to bread and water, or giving him double service, but never such a beating as to make his body a living sore! And now, Virgília, go to get the balsam and some warm refreshment, to think yourself, in person, the wounds of that poor wretch.

She understood his intention: to repair his inhuman act, so much so that a tinge of stubbornness and spite flashed across his face.

- Rufila! - she called, without moving a foot. The maid appeared.

- Go to get the bandages, the jar of balm and that amphora in the cupboard, and then go and tend to Gundicar's wounds.

While the servant girl was gathering the supplies, Fábius kept silent; then, snatching the bandages and medicine from her, he said to her:

- Come with me, I'll think the wounded man myself. - He quickly left.

Virgília was surprised and as if hesitant, but soon jumped out of her chair and went to catch up with her husband on the way.

She grabbed him by the arm and said: - How is that? You want to demean me in front of the family members by taking upon yourself what only belongs to a woman, or better, to a slave?

He faced her with serenity and firmness:

- I must do so, since you refuse, and I don't want to embarrass you. However, let metell you that charitable acts are not, can't, should not be exclusively attributed to slaves. The most aristocratic hands can and should think wounded. Allowing them to whip them on a child's body is what can and should be considered befitting slaves.

Frowning, lips pursed, she snatched the bandages from her husband's hands and walked away lightly, accompanied by Rufila equally dashing.

Preceded by Grácus, the new steward, she went to the slaves' quarters and entered a clean, airy room with a window opening onto the vegetable garden. Gundicar was lying there on the sill, his eyes closed, motionless. Next to him a black woman was soaking the bloody clothes in a basin. When she saw the lady, she humbly came over to kiss the hem of his cloak.

- How is the boy? - she approached, somewhat indecisively.

- He's not even moving, my mistress.

Rufila removed the covers and Virgília gave a muffled cry as she looked at that body full of sores, rags of loose skin and purplish plaques.

- Ah! He's well punished and will certainly never fall again - said Rufila, addressing Virgília.

- But the lady is very nervous, leave everything to me. Come on, Hela, run and get some more bandages and some hot water.

The patrician stepped aside and sat down at a small table, in a meditative attitude. Her breasts were gasping, she felt like crying... Because of that poor boy, Fábius had been upset, he had said bitter things to her, and there she was. Well, then, she would keep the same incoercible grudge against him, perhaps with added strength. Nor would she ever forget such a detestable episode.

Muffled moans from the little one, who squirmed at the slightest contact, aroused her attention again. Intimately, he regretted the fate of that wretch, without being able to explain the reason for that ineluctable, instinctive aversion.

He stood up, filled a cup of the sedative potion, and approached her.

The young addict's disfigured and suffering face lit up with a faint smile, and his eyes fixed on Virgília's with the usual mixture of admiration and hatred.

- Drink - he said, bending down and presenting her with the cup, which he quickly emptied with greed. - Now, try to sleep: soon you'll have wine and fruit. He took a lyre of roses from his waistband, handed it to her, and left, waving his hand benevolently.

Outside, Práculus was waiting for her, and she threw herself at his feet begging him to forgive her.

He told her yes, he would, but to avoid appearing to the angry boss for the time being.

A little fellow running, out of breath, announced:

- The noble Cáius Lucílius has just arrived and is waiting for you for lunch.

He headed for the atrium, where two men were walking around chatting. After exchanging greetings, they moved to the triclinium, where she took her place at the table, while the two men stretched out on the divas.

Virgília was stubbornly silent and Márcus Fábius was apprehensive. Cáius, who was watching them with a sidelong glance, said at last, with a comical smile:

- Guys, I'm sniffing around here for something of what awaits me if I'm ever fortunate enough to marry. There are ruffles and tiffs in this atmosphere, something like a conjugal sky filled with clouds... Could I not represent the genie of peace to reconcile you? I know in advance that you, Virgília, are innocent and that the barbarian Fábius wants to play the role of tyrant.

- Well, I wish, Cáius, that when you have a wife, she will be a sweet mediator between you and the harsh realities of life, in such a way that she will spare you any unpleasantness, so that those that may arise in the domestic sanctuary will be due only to you.

- What else do you want to know? - said Virgília blushing. - Fábius makes it clear to you who is solely responsible for our disagreement, and that I'm only trying to cause you discomfort?

Fábius gave her a reproachful look and briefly recounted the events of that morning.

Cáius, who had heard everything sucking on a hunting wing, answered nonchalantly:

- I think you're bothered a lot by so-and-so things, because it seems fair to me that they should beat the little brute until he confesses to the offense. With slaves, there's no other way to proceed. My father, you know, is very good to his slaves: he gives them good and plentiful food, moderate work, but he never fails to punish them whenever they deserve it. There isn't a year that goes by that five or six don't succumb under the whip, but Dad doesn't get bored... Some die, others are bought; that's what he says and does. As for Grandma, the case is different: she absolutely doesn't accept it, and whenever there is a scourge, she goes there with her balms and poultices to the aid of the "poor ones", which is how she describes them. For my part, I don't think it's worth punishing such brutes only to have to come to their aid immediately afterwards.

- I can't agree with you - Fábius replied - but, in any case, Fábia's attitude - the venerable one. confirms my view that a noble woman can't witness such acts of cruelty without trying to prevent them, or at least to mitigate their consequences.

- Hum! - muttered Cáius - I understand... Then, as if to change the subject, he conveyed to the couple an invitation from Fábia and Semprônius for that evening. Accepting the invitation, he continued:

- I've one more request: I would like to give Virgília a ride in my car to try out my new steeds. Will you entrust me with my childhood companion on this adventure? Needless to say, I'll be prudent, and we'll go straight home, where you'll be waiting for us, after a ride out of town.

Márcus Fábius held out his hand and said cordially:

- Thank you for the idea of providing this recreation for my wife, especially if you promise me prudence.... I trust you - how could I not? - my capricious little beauty to you, even so that she can clear her brow with the fresh breeze from the fields. From here, let's go to the terrace and drink some wine, which is ambrosial. This, while Virgília goes to get ready. Afterwards, you'll leave, and I'll take a sedan to welcome you at your home.

Hours later, the car of Cáius Lucílius re-entered the city through the nearest door to Semprônius' house.

The spindly, foam-covered parade floated by, attesting to a beautiful career. Virgília, flushed and laughing, seemed to have overcome all her sorrows, and was engaged in an animated conversation with her companion.

In the afternoon, absorbed in their conversation, they didn't

notice Túlia and Dafné, who, cloaked in dark robes, were returning to the store.

- I wonder what kind of woman that is - murmured the girl, pressing her mother's arm.

- Never mind: that's Virgília, wife of Márcus Fábius and childhood companion of Cáius.

- But... it was up to him to show off in his chariot, not someone else's wife.

How about that? So enraptured that he didn't even see us! See how they laugh, how they look at each other...

He scrunched up his hands, contracted his face, he looked like the demon of jealousy.

- Come on, let's go - said Túlia - we have someone waiting for us at home.

- Go. I want to watch them - replied Dafné. As soon as her mother turned the corner, she ran into a cross street: and, anticipating the car, she shrank into a ravine of the wall. Her eyes were flashing like those of a wild feline, as she crumpled in her hands the white handkerchief she had removed from her neck.

It was just now when the horses' heads were pointing in the opposite direction. Dafné didn't hesitate, he threw the shrouded handkerchief into the eyes of one of them. Before Cáius could realize what had happened, the girl stepped back and shrank into the dark angle of the wall.

The frightened steeds were prancing furiously; the neckerchief had caught in the clip of their dewlap and was fluttering before the eyes of one of them, who started to hum as if he had gone mad. Virgília gave a piercing scream and clung instinctively to the waist of Cáius who, red-faced, with an unheard-of effort from his swollen muscles, was trying to master the extremely dangerous situation of this trance. He would certainly have succeeded, thanks to his Herculean strength (also because the handkerchief, with the horse's lunges, had come off), if by chance one of the guides had not also broken, which allowed the fragile vehicle to be pulled free, on the verge of smashing against the walls, or even against the stones of the streets and alleys.

In the peristyle of Semprônius' house, the austere patrician, in the company of Fábia and Márcus Fábius, was talking, waiting for the return of the strollers, when an enormous commotion aroused their attention.

Imagine their astonishment when they recognized the figure of Cáius in the car, which was already in a state of disarray, trying to

hold on to the reins in one hand, while with the other he held Virgília, who, shrunk and clinging to him, seemed to miraculously resist the violent jolts and jolts of the cart.

At the sight of such a picture, Fábia fell to her knees and, arms raised to the sky, obsessed over the mercy of the gods.

Semprônius and Fábius, terrified, livid, shouted the most contradictory orders.

At last, there was a real commotion; slaves were projecting themselves in front of the team in order to run into it. One of them was soon caught and crushed; others, bruised, were repulsed like feathers. Nevertheless, this relative halting movement was providential, and a man who had been chasing the carriage at that point, running at a brisk pace, planted himself in front of the pair.

He raised his strong fist, like a mass of iron, and unloaded it on the forehead of one of the animals, which immediately fell over.

With his other hand he clawed the nostrils of the other, and the car didn't move any further.

Briefly, Márcus Fábius lifted the unconscious Virgília and carried her inside.

Cáius Lucílius, carried on his lap as if he were a child, was led to the peristyle to fall there into the arms of his father, who embraced him deliriously.

But as soon as he was released from his father's arms, the young man ran to raise Fábia, still genuflected, to cover her face with kisses.

However, whether it was the intensity of the emotion, or exhaustion resulting from the superhuman effort expended, the fact is that he too suddenly turned pale and collapsed fainting on a chair.

VII

The savior

While they were trying to help Cáius Lucílius by calling a doctor, Semprônius was trying to get close to the man whom everyone, passers-by, and neighbors alike, hailed as "the savior".

He was still there, standing by the car, wiping his sweaty brow.

- Tell me your name so that I can thank you for the invaluable service you've just rendered me; and then tell me in what and how I can prove my gratitude to you.

- Noble Sempronius, my name is Rutuba, from Rome. If you want to please me, give me service in your house and you can count on my absolute fidelity.

- You're answered: from this moment on, you can settle in this house and rest until I can determine your duties. In any case, you should know that I intend to place you next to my son, whose life you so gallantly saved. Nevertheless, accept this token as a token of my appreciation.

And he gave her a magnificent brooch.

He then exchanged greetings with some neighbors on the happy outcome of the dangerous incident, gave orders concerning the horses and the broken-down carriage, and went to his son's room.

Fábia, who had been there before him, had washed the boy's hands, which had been scalped by the reins, while an old physician had moistened his temples.

No sooner had the patrician entered and Cáius stood up with a sigh of relief.

- What's this? - he asked, surprised.

Then, as if suddenly regaining his memory, he jumped to his feet and shouted:

- Faint... me? but it's just plain imbecile! And now I see that I've given you such a fright, so much so that I see you all alarmed...

With a smile of almost childlike candor, he gathered his father's and grandmother's hands together and brought them to his lips:

- Forgive me... Those horse devils have gone mad, but then again, who could have had the fateful idea to throw this handkerchief at their heads?

- How? For was there anyone who frightened the horses out of spite? - asked Semprônius, his eyes already inflamed. - I'm going to examine the bridles and bridles right now, and maybe I'll find a few more bangs there. I'll also speak to your savior, Rutuba, and if I get any evidence, woe tothe wretch!

He hurried away, but Cáius caught up with him to say:

- If my savior is still there, send him here. I'd like to go with you, but my head is still a little dizzy.

- Well, yes. Moreover, Rutuba will stay with us because I've given her a place in our home.

Soon, the door opened, and the new servant stood on the doorstep. His lynx-like gaze seemed to want to peer into the face of the handsome young patrician. As soon as he caught sight of him, Cáius held out his hand and spoke with the kindness and frankness that, despite all his whims and fancies, won him the affection of the whole world.

- Thank you, Rutuba; only a brave man can risk his life for those he doesn't know; come on, give me a hug, since no money can pay for these services...

Astonished, but equally captivated, the commoner approached and kissed the patrician on the shoulder.

- You do me a great honor, noble Cáius Lucílius!

And Cáius went on with vivacity:

- My father said that you wished to stay with us, and you'll be at my private service at once.

He took from his finger a ring studded with emeralds and gave it to her, adding:

- Keep it as a memento of this moment.

The Roman thanked her and withdrew monologuing: - And is it to such a man that that beast should be destined? Ah, there's no way he could love her for long. And could he even love her? No?... I don't think so. He will begin to get bored, and the day will come when he will hate her.... That day I'll be avenged.

*

* *

As the car disappeared into the distance, Dafné hurried home again and, without exchanging a word with her mother, curled up in her room.

The first surge of anger had passed her by, and now she was all swallowed up in a whirlwind of tumultuous thoughts.

She believed herself quite safe and free from the possibility that anyone had seen her criminal gesture. And yet, there were two witnesses she could hardly imagine: the first, we already know, was Rutuba, who, from the door of a tavern, seeing a well-known figure passing close by, and suspecting who it was, quickly jumped in pursuit of

the car, and the second was Cláudius, who, coming from a cross street, had arrived just as the horses were starting to gallop. His sharp eye soon discerned the female profile sneaking out of the shadowy street.

However, glued to the wall, he had made no move to help the one he called - *his friend!*

Then he picked up the white rag he had seen floating for a moment on the animal's head and made sure that it was a silk handkerchief fringed with gold, with one corner torn off. A faint smile of cruel satisfaction passed across his lips, and he carefully put away the precious find...

Someone who had arrived was arguing in the store, and Dafné interrupted his thoughts.

- Are you back? and what more do you want, here? This is what Túlia said in a very irritated tone.

- That's a good one! If I'm coming back here, it's because I needed to come back... Where is Dafné?

That voice made the girl shiver, and she immediately saw her ex-fiancé come in, armed with a flashlight.

He placed it on the table, approached the girl who had stood up and whose pale face still reflected the emotions of the criminal adventure.

Crossing his arms in profile, he exclaimed sarcastically:

- Cáius Lucílius is safe and sound, and it was I who saved him.... This brooch and ring that you see here, are pledges of gratitude from father and son. Now, I want to know what you'll give me for my silence, that is, not to denounce you...

She gave a scream and fell to her knees, hands clasped, before her ex-fiancé.

- Don't disgrace me! Don't prevent the wedding, and count on me body and soul, in exchange for your silence. Accept the wife of Cáius Lucílius as the greatest prize she can offer you.

A flash of hatred flashed in the Roman's eyes. He took a step back and said with contempt:

- It would be an ignoble prize, because I hate you, not only, but because every woman who offers herself loses her charm. Besides, why should Cáius - he who has been so generous in shaking hands with me as equals - pay with his dignity for my silence? No, I'll never tell him anything about what is going on, about the infamy to which your bestial jealousy has dragged you, because that would simply lead him to reject you, when my aim is that he hates you and annihilates you... So, be careful not to insult me, ever, in Semprônius' house, where I'll

stay anyway. Also, don't even think about betraying Cáius Lucílius... If you ever marry him, it is up to me to watch for the opportune advent of my revenge.

He turned his back on her and left.

Túlia came in like a hurricane:

- Imbecile, stupid, idiot, what have you done? What kind of attempt is this that has you tied hand and foot to this man?

And he fell on top of her, slapping her. The girl reeled in rage, and they fought a real battle. After a shower of slaps and insults, Túlia retired to the store, muttering angrily

- *Infamous, ungrateful, were it not for my desire for revenge...*

Then, somewhat calmer, she went in to tidy up the store, when she suddenly heard a knock at the door.

- Who is it? - she asked, already suspicious.

- It's me, Cláudius - answered a singsong voice - I just want to say two words to Dafné.

He threw his cloak on a chair, while Julia pointed to the inner room.

- Another witness who comes to trade on his silence... And I begin to predict that you, ungrateful daughter, will risk your life in this adventure.

As Cláudius entered, Dafné stretched out on the diva, face turned to the wall. Hair in disarray, one could see through the tear in her bodice a tract of her alabaster spouse. The boy sketched a cynical smile. Then, moving closer, he put his hand on that bare flesh.

Dafné pulled herself together, but when she met his bold, burning gaze, she shuddered and jumped up.

- What do you want, Cláudius?

- Just to show you this handkerchief, which was hung from the forehead of a runaway horse... I found it on the street, and I think it simply belongs to you.

She gave a muffled groan and put her hands on her head.

- Don't panic like that, my wealth; I won't harm you.... I only want you to promise me in the future your love and some of the money that Cáius can give you for the pins. You can see that this way I won't hinder yours and you'll make my fortune... Do you agree?

- Yes, I'll do anything you want - she replied livid and contrite.

She felt trapped, like a fly in a spider's web. She still considered herself a nobody, and already she saw herself hamstrung, compromised: on one side, the terrible Rutuba preaching his revenge; on the other, the mellifluous Cláudius demanding her money and her own honor.

- In this case, we stay friends and goodbye. The handkerchief I keep preventing any gap in your memory.

He gave her a meaningful look, drew his cloak and left. At that moment, his face was transfigured in an expression of torpid joy. The mask of frankness and loyalty, which he usually buckled, was diluted. What game was he now going to play with that Cáius Lucílius whom he hated in his heart, not only for his beauty and spiritual gifts, but also for the fortune that greeted him?

Favored by the gods and women, he was grateful to be able to corrupt his wife and possess her almost, as it were, under his eyes, in his own thalamus...

- Ah! If only fortune had given me Virgília too! - he muttered between his teeth.

The truth is that he hated Márcus Fábius' wife for the carelessness with which she treated him. Deep inside him, he always hated her when she wove a crown and had fun adjusting it to his blond hair, or even when, holding a tray of confectionery, she made him eat it by spoonfuls, telling him - "it's to sweeten his voice"...

It was precisely because he didn't exist as a man, in the opinion of that beautiful creature, that he had a strange and tenacious passion for her, a mixture of love and hate.

At Semprônius' house, the salvation of Cáius Lucílius and his childhood friend was celebrated with a banquet. When he saw the girl for the first time after her fainting spell, Cáius, with his characteristic enthusiasm, embraced her, kissed her cheeks, and congratulated her on her courage and cold blood.

- You're a heroine, Virgilinha! What other woman, among a hundred women, in similar circumstances, would not embarrass me with her screams, and perhaps even hinder my movements with her chirping? You, however, remained impassive, clinging to my waist and leaving my arms free.

Everyone drank in Virgília's health and courage. And when the young couple returned to penates, Marcus Fabius, lovingly embracing his wife, asked her:

- Are you still angry that I've constrained you to be charitable to an imbecile and vanquished?

She blushed and plunged her face into her husband's chest, confessing:

- Fábia told me that I didn't proceed well; that a woman's duty is to sympathize with all the unfortunate, to help all the unfortunate. So, as soon as we arrive, I'm going to see Gundicar... Forgive my stubbornness, for I'm punished by the idea that I could have died in

disagreement with you.

- Tomorrow - said Fábius, kissing her silky hair - we'll go to the temple to praise the gods for all the benefits we've received today.

And while husband and wife were thus reconciled, Semprônius said to his son when he asked for permission to go back to his dormitory:

- Dear Cáius, I have no doubt that the immortals, by letting me glimpse the possibility of losing you today, wanted to soften my heart: so, I've decided to allow you to marry the woman you've chosen. You may be happy, and you may never reproach me for my condescension.

Radiant with joy, the young man thanked me, confessing that all his ideals were satisfied, he aspired to nothing more in the world.

- Tomorrow - added the old patrician - I'll go to Túlia's house in person, to persuade her to close the store, the price of which I'll pay her, and to leave Herculaneum.

VIII

Semprônius in Túlia's house

The morning after that memorable day, Julia was alone in her store, when she saw a rich sedan approach and stop at her door.

And when she saw the noble Semprônius step out, her face lit up with satisfied irony.

- What an honor for my modest store! What can I offer the illustrious Semprônius that would be worthy of his choice and preference?

She said with feigned and reverent humility, bowing down before the austere old man.

He stared at her, stern and impassive as always, as if trying to recognize in that shriveled and emaciated creature the same seductively beautiful maiden with whom he had quarreled twenty years before over her brother. He had never thought of the possibility of one day coming to ask her for his daughter's hand, to make her his daughter-in-law. His shrewd gaze, however, didn't escape the fades of victorious irony that Julia barely tried to conceal. He tied her face and went on to say

- No comedies... Despite the years that have passed, we still know each other: your spite and your hatred are not dead to me.

Like a badly wounded lioness, she stood up and, concentrating all the ferocity of her soul in her gaze, told him:

- You're wrong: your contempt and your efforts to disconnect me from Drúsus have finally restored me to my senses. And not only that, but also the ease with which he forgot me. When I moved from this city, I found happiness in the affection of a husband and the love of a daughter. The loss of the husband and furnish with wings of fortune forced me to come back and open this store, as a guarantee of daily bread. However, believe me, I hate the patricians and I pray to the gods to keep me out of business with them. I know all too well their pride, which makes them suppress all feelings of truth and justice, for simple cradle and caste prejudices. But... how silly of me to be reminiscing about things long gone! I'm sure you're coming here to buy something, so send whatever you want, I'm at your service.

The patrician had heard everything in a bad way, and, coming closer, he measured her from top to bottom in a depressed look:

- Don't lie, cunning and vengeful panther; you never forgot your hatred, your spite for not having married my brother. The gods know who stole your sight and who killed Sabina. Necessity, you say, forced you to come back here; but I also realized, as soon as I passed by

your door and saw your insolent joy, that you had only come to execute the same failed plan with your own person. You insinuated your daughter to seduce my Cáius, and you know perfectly well that I haven't come to make any purchase, but to tell you, briefly, that I authorize the marriage.

Now, if you really hated the patricians and repelled any connection with them, as you hypocritically say, you would have already interrupted me with a formal rebuff. But the truth is that you keep quiet and lower your eyes, since you aspire, at every moment and with all the energy of your cupid soul, to this alliance with the illustrious family that has always obstinately and justly repelled you. Because you, with this marriage, hope not only to create valuable relations, but possibly to get closer to my poor brother. But you're wrong, I've come to tell you my decisions, as inflexible as the oath of the ruler of the gods. I tell you, then, that I accept your daughter as a member of my family but you, never!

At this point, the patrician's voice became more forceful, and his gaze vibrated, heavy with lead, on the plebeian's disfigured face.

- You, who are suspected of a double crime, will never cross my threshold. I only want to know how much you want for this shop and for your departure from this city. I'll pay you in full and immediately, but you must give up your business now, ready to leave as soon as we send for Dafné.

As he spoke, a cadaverous livor spread over Túlia's face. Her body trembled. Surprise and anger at the same time choked her voice. To be separated from her daughter and be cast out, repelled from her new family; to renounce forever the hope of seeing Drúsus, the driving force behind all her projects; to make of Dafné a patrician and plunge herself into obscurity? She had the urge to strangle Semprônius...

But before that vigorous old man, whose features showed energy and tenacity bordering on despotism, he was intimidated.

The patrician, who didn't miss the slightest gesture, added calmly:

- I must warn you that my son's feelings toward your daughter will in no way modify my resolutions. You have five minutes to solve it, and it goes without saying that I won't be coming back here.

Túlia tried something to answer, but she felt like she was short of breath. Bringing her hands to her face, she stormed out. Behind the door she bumped into her daughter, who was hastily adjusting her solemn day dress - a white wool dress, trimmed with blue grego.

From her agitation and the look in her eyes, you could tell she had heard everything.

- I must appear and thank Semprônius - she said softly, as she smoothed her disheveled hair. - Yes! I love Cáius Lucílius too much not to discuss conditions!

- You fool! - retorted Túlia in a barely muffled voice, in anger, grabbing her by the arm - it's up to me, not you, to decide.

- You think?

She shook herself free and laughed mockingly:

- Well, if I've understood Semprônius' speech correctly, I'm the one to decide, because you don't even want to see him. And he's right, because, in fact, what would you look like in that aristocratic house, when you've never been anything but a small grocer? With me, it's a different matter: I'm young and I'll easily adapt to the customs of the patrician nobility. Even so, to prove to you that I'm not ungrateful and that I don't forget the part you took in my fortunate enterprise, I undertake to give you news of Drúsus.

She slipped away from her mother, who was stunned at such insolence, and burst into the store.

Head down, hands folded across her chest, simulating virginal shyness and modesty, she approached Semprônius, but, raising her frightened dove's gaze to him, she found his eyes cold, penetrating, fixed on her, and a blush - this one unfeigned - purplish her cheeks.

- Come closer – Semprônius said to her with such or such kindness - if you're as good as you're beautiful, you'll have an indulgent friend in me. Now, tell me, do you agree with the separation from your mother and the renunciation of all relationships incompatible with your new social status?

It was with a gesture of gracious humility that she knelt to kiss his hand, saying:

- Since the father of my darling Cáius accepts me as his daughter, there is no other family for me but that of my future husband.

A slight smile cleared the austere patrician's brow. For him, it was only natural that, for the sake of his Cáius, everything else in this world would be abandoned.

- I see, daughter, how great and sincere your love is. I congratulate you, and if you keep it up, you'll be happy.

Túlia broke out in a rage, Semprônius interposed himself:

- We are already understood, and as for you, what price do you stipulate?

- Nothing: I keep my store, no one can force me to sell it. And as for this ungrateful daughter (in an uncontrollable gesture, he raised his hand), take her with you, now, because I disown and abhor her. Take her like the viper she is, warm her in your bosom, until the day

she bites you...

Trembling and dismayed, Dafné made a pleading gesture to her mother, thinking that everything would be undone if she stayed in Herculaneum.

Túlia, however, blurted out gruffly:

- Go, wretch! in my house there is no more room for you.... Get out, out, now! Get out of my sight!

Semprônius, in between, intervened:

- You forget, Túlia, that twenty years ago you yourself spontaneously proposed to me to abandon your own if I would take you for my sister-in-law.... Today you repel, mercilessly, your only daughter, only because she loves unconditionally, and you don't consent to share her privileges. By expelling her, you yourself break the ties of blood and kinship. You're wrong, however, if you think that you're staying here to contradict me, since, disconnected from Dafné, you'll be a stranger to me and you'll be free to trade wherever you please. And as for you, my daughter, I take you under my protection, from this moment on.

Without looking at Julia, he unfolded his cloak over the girl and led her to the sedan. Dafné obeyed him timidly, mute, automatically.

That steely gaze, that haughty countenance, that severe voice, instilled fear in her.

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The litter stopped in front of Márcus Fábius' house. Semprônius came down with the girl by the arm and they were immediately received by the owner of the house, who was very surprised.

He apologized for Virgília's absence, who had gone to visit Metela and would not return until later.

- I regret that I can't speak to your wife to ask her for a welcome, protection and friendship for my son's fiancée, whom I bring here to this hospitable roof. - And he recounted, in rapid strokes, what had happened at Túlia's home.

With that kindness all his own, Márcus Fábius assured her right away that Dafné would be received fraternally and expressed the wish that Cáius would come to visit her as soon as possible, since she must have been intimidated and disturbed by this change of situation.

Semprônius thanked him for everything, and after a brief talk, he left, followed by Márcus, who insisted on taking him back to his litter.

As soon as she was alone, free of Semprônius' gaze, Dafné took a breath and went in to curiously examine the luxurious furnishings of the hall, touching and palming upholstery, carpets and pelmets.

The sound of approaching footsteps stopped her inspection. It was Márcus Fábius who had returned and gently invited her to come out onto the terrace, where he sat down beside her and tried to distract her, persuading her that love would smooth over the difficulties of the moment and, once she was married, everything would work out marvelously, since Cáius, beautiful and kind, would know how to compensate her for all the lost affections. And she would find in the venerable matron, Fábia, the most indulgent and loving of mothers.

While distractedly listening to these words of the young patrician, Dafné examined him with the greatest attention, intimately comparing the physical qualities of her fiancé with those of the husband of that blonde Virgília, whom she herself detested as the cause of the brutal attack to which she had been dragged by jealousy and which had given her two implacable masters at the same time. No one had said it, because it would not be presumable, but the truth is that the resulting impression of that confrontation was all favorable to Márcus Fábius! Yes: his more delicate forms, his more discreet manners, those deep, dreamy eyes, and even the metal of his melodious, paused voice, all seemed more beautiful to him than the exuberant vigor, the fiery gaze, and the colorful, impetuous words of his fiancé.

A new kind of jealousy crept into her frivolous and lustful soul, and from herself to herself she thought spitefully: "damn bad luck! the red-headed cat snatched the best one from me"....

At that moment, a crystal voice rang out in the adjoining room, and Virgília appeared at the entrance to the terrace. Fábius went to meet her:

- Dear Virgília, here we have Dafné, the fiancée of our Cáius, who, for reasons I'll tell you later, needs a temporary asylum. Semprônius himself brought her to us and asked for your protection and good friendship.

A very light wrinkle creased the forehead of the newcomer. This wrinkle could mean anything, except friendship.

All her patrician pride was aroused by the contingency of receiving into her home, to treat as an equal, that creature from Bolônia, whom the foolish fantasy of Cáius Lucílius had plucked from the mud, and whom, however, clean society could not reject, since the noble Semprônius sanctioned the marriage.

Out of deference to her old friend, and overcome in part by the tender gaze of her husband, who was as if divining her inmost revolt,

she advanced to the other and extended to her not her arms but her hand, saying:

- Welcome, Dafné, it is my pleasure to ask you to stay here, until the wedding day.

- And I hope - added Fábius, trying to soften the effect of the frosty welcome - that you'll esteem each other more, as you become more acquainted.

And then he walked away, to let them go free. A long silence weighed upon the two women. Face to face, mute, they were, as it were, mutually autopsying each other,

Dafné gazed, somewhat spitefully, at the distinguished apparel of the patrician, as well as at her slender build, her petite, fetid hands, her fingers white and as sharp as lilies: and Virgília paid her attention with sparkling eyes, staring at her opulent forms, her face beautiful, no doubt, but devoid of nobility; those blue eyes, bright and bold, but without any expression of candor or kindness.

Semprônius could have been deceived by that humble appearance, but Virgília's feminine nose soon revealed to him a frivolous, impulsive and sensual temperament.

And, as if to confirm the concept, Dafné, frowning, exclaimed spitefully and arrogantly

- Why are you looking at me like that? Does my presence displease you? In fact, I can't understand why Semprônius led me to a strange house, instead of taking me to his house.

- You're very wrong to suppose you're in a strange house - answered Virgília with a mischievous, indefinable smile. - But it's natural that strangers seem strange to you as many from this day forward as approach you... The truth is, however, that Semprônius brought you here to spare you the tremendous humiliation of entering your fiancé's house as a homeless and homeless creature, a street scum, in short.

If Márcus Fábius, when he received you, said that our protection would be assured until the day of the consortium, you can rest assured that this house is one of those which honors those who come to it as friends.

- But I only wanted to say that Semprônius has the means to support me, and that it is unflattering for the bride of Cáius Lucílius to have to beg for an asylum.

A slight blush tinged Virgília's cheeks, while a glimmer of proud disdain flashed in her eyes.

- Allow me to say that your warning only proves your complete ignorance of the social formalities that apply to the environment in

which you're now called to live. For you, glimpsed from the store you've just left, Cáius seems very rich. Your words could perhaps impress and convince, because of their arrogance, some peasant girl or some greengrocer of your relations. But "for us," Cáius is only an equal, and if we receive you here, it is only out of friendship with his family, and never out of consideration for his fortune, which we don't need. I must also tell you that if you want to live well among aristocrats, you must hold your tongue and change these vulgar and insolent attitudes. Cáius Lucílius can certainly give you a title of patrician, but not the education peculiar to his, to our caste.

I tell you this for your own good, for in you I only want to see the bride of my childhood companion. Not everyone, however, esteems Cáius as we esteem him, to tolerate willingly the rudeness of his wife.

Dafné was furious and dismayed at the same time, since she had enough insight to understand that the other was right and that she, Dafné, had just made a fool of herself, a clear proof of her plebeians, of her fatuity, in short.

Painful silence reigned in the atmosphere, and it was a relief for both of them when a slave announced that the chariot of Cáius Lucílius was at the door.

- I don't want to disturb your first wedding interview - Virgília said, rising and disappearing through another door.

IX

The bride and the groom

Indolent, her lips slack, Dafné let herself remain seated, but when she saw the smiling bridegroom come in, accompanied by a slave carrying a large basket, a sudden turnaround occurred in her attitude.

In that ever-fickle heart, the flame of a devouring passion was rekindled, and so, in one leap, she threw herself on the boy's neck, and at the same time, planted her lips on him in an almost brutal kiss.

The young patrician was the first to shake off that silent and ardent assault, and, glancing at his fiancée's flaming face, he said to her:

- Be still, my dear Dafné: - all our longings are at the end of resolution, and the moment will soon come when you'll make yourself the companion of my whole life. My heart overflows with gratitude to my kind father, who, to make me happy, imposed on himself the sacrifice of his own love! Do you know what he told me? That you made a good impression on him and that your mother treated you with revolting rudeness. But don't get upset because I'll make up for all these disappointments.

- And your grandmother will welcome me too?

- My grandmother is the embodiment of justice and goodness, there is no one who knows her who doesn't say so and esteem her; and I'm sure you'll be received with open arms.

But by the way, I want you to promise me something, in testimony of your love. Of course, back home I'll see to it that you're respected and served as a mistress; that your orders be obeyed as well as mine; but regarding that venerable matron, I demand of you the deepest respect and absolute obedience. My father, who is my father, has never failed to agree with Grandma and to follow her advice, and I for one consider myself happy to obey her always.

He spoke enthusiastically, with conviction, while with lowered eyes his fiancée barely disguised her discontent.

- So, as far as I can see, you're still considered in your father's house as a grand baby... And Semprônius, who has such a haughty temperament and such energetic attitudes, hasn't yet had the courage to free himself from the tutelage of an old woman, who may be very kind, but can't have the same experience he has in life? Well, I, for my part, must confess that this prospect of doing nothing despite your granny is very unpleasant to me.

- You forget - he returned with a heavy look on his face - that this

old woman isn't only my father's mother, but also the one who raised and educated me, replacing the mother I lost early on. Her dominion is therefore none other than that which derives from pure affection, and therefore obedience and compromise have never been difficult or painful for us. However, it isn't hard for me to forgive your judgment, considering that you don't know Fábia. For the rest, I hope to never again hear such irreverent words from your lips.

Seeing her silently lower her head, he kissed her forehead and said expansively:

- What is it? Look at me with those beautiful eyes and go examine those upholstery and jewels that are there in that basket. In addition, I've also brought you two slave girls for your private service while you stay here. For the rest, Virgília will guide you. I know you've already spoken to each other, Fabius told me. How about it, don't you think that Virgília is admirably beautiful?

- I can't like any woman who looks beautiful to you - he said, snatching the hand he had held between Cáius's and expanding his anger - when you sincerely love a woman, you don't ask her if she looks at other women's beauty! In any case, I also think that Márcus Fábius is the most beautiful man I've ever seen...

- Dafné!

She blushed and smiled at the same time, but it was a smile that the least shrewd analyst might consider counterfeit.

- I agree that Márcus Fábius is more attractive than I'm, so much so that Virgília passed me over for him (and for which I don't hold the slightest resentment); but in your eyes I want and hope to appear the most handsome of men. What I've said about Virgília isn't meant to provoke jealousy, for there are many beautiful women in Herculaneum, and it isn't possible to glue our eyes of a man, even a married one, so that they stop gazing and boasting about them.

He took a beautiful pearl necklace from the basket and girded his bride's lap with it:

- Well? don't be mean; look at me that I love and admire you, exclusively.

At the sight of the regal gift, she stood up, gave him a hug, and began to rummage lively through the contents of the basket.

- In their purpose of discretion, our kind hosts seem to have forgotten about us - said Cáius, rising to his feet, but almost at the same moment, Márcus Fábius lifted a curtain and said with a smile:

- Sorry to disturb you, but the table has long been set and Virgília is waiting for you.... After all, after so many tribulations, our Dafné must feel tired and have a good appetite.

They went into the dining room. Virgília invited the girl to sit beside her, while the men occupied the divas. Dafné (a servant in Túlia's pigsty, whose sordid avarice didn't allow for even a modest well-being) had never attended such an opulent meal.

Gluttonous and rustic, she delighted in every dish, eating and drinking with a voracity that was scandalous to the people.

Fábius was very annoyed, and tried to prevent her impulses, so much so that he saw her fixating on some delicacy. She, however, completely engrossed, saw nothing and paid no attention.

Virgília could hardly contain her laughter, and Cáius Lucílius blushed at each new stupor of his fiancée, who chewed noisily, sometimes greasing her fingers, sometimes wiping her greasy hands on her dress, or running them through her hair in ape-like mimes, without giving time for the servants to present her with napkins.

When the bizarre repast was finally over, Virgília's mischievous eyes noticed that Dafné had a shiny chin and cheeks, a dirty dress, greying features, and her hair in a puffy ponytail, as if she had just come out of a circus arena, not a dinner party.

- Don't you want to take a bath and change your clothes? - asked Virgília.

- Yes, I do, but what kind of dress should I change, if I don't have one here? Look, give me a dress like yours, whose pattern, and embellishments like me.

- I've brought you some lace, and the two slave girls I've brought will make your dresses - cried Cáius, distressed.

- Oh, that's right, I forgot, and I'll order these women to do it right now; but, the truth is that right now I'm without clothes, and now I remember, I've to go home and get two beautiful dresses, one green and the other sky-blue, dotted with red stars, that my mother gave me (she was going to say Rutuba, but she stopped herself in time and concluded).

- You want to go to your mother's house? but look, she ran out on you - said Virgília in astonishment.

- She has to give me the dresses, whether she wants to or not, ole! even because, you know, she knows the strength of these wrists... - And she shouted, closing her fists and waving her arms in aggressive movements.

- Let me go, Virgília, I must go. A woman of my size, a real woman, can't wear your doll's clothes...

Cáius, in one leap, put his arms around her:

- First, open those hands, because patrician wives never use them that way.... And so, don't let me ever see you in that posture again...

Then, you'll not go to your mother's house, because it is I who don't want to. I'll buy and make as many dresses as you want and need.

She denied, with her hand on her hip:

- I don't think you want to treat me like your slave. I've decided to go to the house, and I'll, because I don't want to lose the dresses and other things left there.

Cáius was livid, his eyes glowing strangely.

- You won't go - he finally said - and if you do, you can stay there, because you won't be my bride anymore.

As this scene unfolded, Fábius and Virgília exchanged admiring glances.

Dafné covered her face with her hands and burst into sobs.

Whether it was because Cáius wanted to put an end to the unpleasant incident, or because it was painful for him to see his beloved weeping like that, he approached her and, taking her hand, spoke softly:

- Calm down, accompany Virgília; you need to listen to her advice and master these impulses, considering that what is excused in the women of the people can't be tolerated in our social environment, where you would be mercilessly ridiculed, since not everyone is as unforgiving as Fábius and his wife. Now, wipe away those tears, give me a hug, and go change your clothes, which are already there, waiting for you and very much to your liking, believe me.

She threw herself violently around her fiancé's neck, but faced with his cold and reserved look, her arms hung down inertly, and with her head down, she followed Virgília.

When they disappeared, Cáius Lucílius let himself fall into a chair and thrust his chin into his hands. Márcus Fábius looked compassionately at his friend and, touching his shoulder, spoke up:

- Don't riot like that, don't despair over some stupidities you should have foreseen this is a rustic creature, brought up by a brutal woman and whose education we need to redo. Don't worry, we'll manage. If she stays here, we'll try, as far as possible, to keep her from strange eyes, and by the time you marry, she'll know how to conduct herself at a banquet in our social circles. Cáius sighed more freely.

- Do you think I won't be embarrassed in front of our equals? - he asked, raising his big black eyes. - Certainly, I love her: but, seeing her even now with closed fists, I must confess I'm discouraged, for I never supposed her so wild...

- What I infer is that her mother beat her and forced her to defend herself like this, with a fist; but now, treated with delicacy and kindness, I expect she'll lose the rusticity that impresses you so much.

*

* *

One afternoon, about five weeks after the episode we have just recounted, when Virgília was visiting Metela, she and Metela stayed in their favorite nook, which was, by the way, a large room wide open in colonnades on the garden side, which one descended by two stone steps, preceded by a small terrace of rare plants and overshadowed by large trees. Between columns, fastened with golden canes by sliding rings, stretched the "velárium" of heavy upholstery and richly embroidered. Suspended in this "velarium", the wind blew into the room in cool gusts, saturating it with the fragrances of the garden.

Metela, sitting at a small tan table, was amusing herself while making a woman's work, while she watched two boys, ages seven and eight, who, under the watchful eye of an old black woman, were playing with a large dog hitched to a cart.

In front of Metela, Virgília was half leaning against a diva, nibbling on fruit and sweets placed on the table, within reach.

The conversation was lively:

- Well, as I tell you: I'm most grateful to Semprônius for having spared me the honorable task of making Dafné a patrician, and I think you too would gladly think so - said Metela chastising.

Virgília threw away the pomegranate she was cracking and replied, frowning:

- Were it not for the old friendship I've with Semprônius and my childhood companion, that little fellow wouldn't stay at my house for an hour... I wouldn't be surprised Cáius had conquered her as a prey of war from a barbarian nation; but since she is a Roman woman, even a plebeian, it's inconceivable! She is impudent, cupid, capricious and tyrannical at the same time. The two slaves she gave her, Cáius, suffer real martyrdom, giving them no rest day and night, punishing them for the slightest carelessness.

- And have you noticed - remarked Metela - how Cáius is sometimes apprehensive? To me, I think he's had enough of his fiancée. However, I also think that he won't give in and will end up marrying her out of stubbornness, even because he got himself into a dead end and he doesn't want to incur the sin of cowardice, repudiating the girl after she was thrown out of her mother's house and received by Semprônius himself as a pledge of marriage.

- I don't think like you, Metela: for me, it's never too late to correct a mistake. What I suppose is that perhaps Cáius loves her, despite

everything.

- But let's face it: beautiful, but of a vulgar beauty, devoid of other attractions, you can't expect a long ascendancy over our kindly Cáius, whose faithfulness is the least of his virtues. But after all, you still haven't told me what Fábia's opinion is.

- Now, you know that Fábia doesn't condemn anyone at first sight; but the truth is that the other day she said to me with sadness: "I don't want to judge the poor girl, who had a denatured mother to raise her, and I would like to appeal to the future, if I could surprise her with a less cold, sincerer look; but the truth is that her pretended humility, her flattery and hypocritical caresses disgust me. And you understand, Metela, that in Fábia's indulgent mouth, these concepts are worth a condemnation. For the rest, think about it: we still have a lot to see, poor Cáius is going to have a lot to live up to. Jealous, but with a Bedouin jealousy, the fag hates and mistreats all women to whom Cáius spares a word or a more affable smile.

Shaking her chair, Metela laughed heartily.

- Oh! the panther is jealous, but not only of her fiancé... I wouldn't tell you this if Fábius wasn't who he is...

Virgília blushed and her eyes twinkled: - So, have you also noticed that this slug just barely out of the puddle harasses my husband when the fiancé is absent? But... what fun do you find in that? - she added, despised, seeing her friend still laughing.

- No. Such attacks are ridiculous - said Metela, and then turned serious - but what's funny is that your excellent husband doesn't delude himself with the fervent worship he inspires, he doesn't understand and continues to treat her with a spirit of brotherhood, which admits no ulterior motives. Otherwise, you can rest assured, because women of the Dafné brand will never win your husband over.

- You're right, Metela, because every time we are alone, he tells me with regret about that savagery and ends by saying that he could never imagine Cáius capable of such a choice.

Then he grimaces: - "you're right; after me, only myself..."

- I wouldn't believe that a creature like Dafné could inspire a man like Cáius with anything other than pity; but anyway, it's good that the wedding will take place in ten days, and you'll be free of such a prebend. Speaking of which: when is Drúsus arriving with his daughter?

- They say in four or five days... And didn't I almost forget this news? Dafné herself gave it to me. This chatterbox can keep nothing of what she hears or is told, and since she has no other confidant, she tells me all the details that her fiancé confides to her. This is how

I learned that Nero, the brother of Cáius, is also expected. They just don't know whether he will come alone, or in company with Drúsus.

- Nero, the son of the first marriage? Is he coming here? - asked Metela, her eyes widening. - But it's extraordinary! I can't conceive that Semprônius would have such a memory... As soon as he married Livia, his first care was to banish the three children of the first marriage from the home, sending them to one of his faraway estates, and then he never sought to see them again.

- Hum! - murmured Virgília, looking impressed - it can't be said that Semprônius was right. But then again, why would his father force him to renounce his beloved wife to marry that Julia he hated? Materially, it is certain that his sons lacked nothing, and in fact they are all well off today. The eldest, Bálbus Antônio, has made a magnificent marriage and is there in his homeland in Umbria; Nero is already a military tribune, serving in a Praetorian legion and, they say, with his career guaranteed...

As far as his coming now is concerned, here is what Dafné told me: - it seems that Drúsus conceived the project of marrying Nero to his daughter, who had a great fortune on her mother's side. Nero being thus pigmented endowed, Semprônius, freed from further cares about the patrimony of this son, smiled at the plan and let himself be persuaded by Fábia, who should invite the two exiled sons to attend the wedding of Cáius. Yesterday, finally, they received a letter from Drúsus announcing the day of arrival and that Nero would probably accompany him.

Metela stooped down for a moment and gazed lovingly at the two little children playing in the garden.

A long silence followed.

- I don't understand - she finally said, as if awakening from her rapture - how someone can banish a child from their heart to favor another... Poor Semprônius! I don't envy him his luck and his situation before Nero, and, either I'm mistaken, or Fábia hasn't been right in raising and sponsoring this visit of her exiled grandson. The fact is that, deprived of his father's love and warmth, he may well feel the spicule of jealousy and become an enemy of Cáius, who, after all, isn't to blame.

- You, Metela, always see things in the worst light: Nero won't even have time to get jealous, wrapped up in the whirlwind of so many parties... First, we'll have the wedding of Cáius, then his wedding to

Drusilla... Oh, it'll be such a treat, and I'm already thinking about the sadness of the end. What a pity that my little Fabio can't get married too!

- Don't worry, wait a little bit; my little Agripinha is eight years older, and we will marry him to your future daughter first...

- But that's just in case Agripinha is on the case file and doesn't get drunk on some bologna - said Virgília, smiling. - But what can I say? Maybe the exotic epidemic won't get past the Semprônius family... Now, for example, imagine the look on Drúsus' face when he learns that Dafné is the daughter of that same Túlia who, they say, he once loved so much. Who knows if, when he meets her again now, the fire of youth will not be rekindled in him?

- Hum! I don't think so: twenty years have passed, and they also say that his wife, Sabina, was as beautiful as Aphrodite.

The children shouted out in an uproar: - Here comes Daddy! The two ladies interrupted their conversation and went to meet Fabrícius and Marcus, already near the terrace.

X
The two brothers

It was the day set for the arrival of the guests from Rome.

In Semprônius' house there was great excitement; the slaves, under the old butler's supervision, were putting the finishing touches to the arrangement of the rooms for the guests.

The "triclínium" was flowered, and tables were improvised for the welcome reception. An hour before, Cáius Lucílius had set out for the port, accompanied by Cláudius, and carrying a litter, a cart, animals, and fame for the transportation of the retinue and baggage.

Isolated during all the hubbub, only the host seemed strange to the festive event. After a disorganized stroll through the small terrace that connected with his room, Semprônius ended up leaning over the balustrade. His closed face and the crease in his lips were such as to indicate that his thoughts must not be pleasant.

He was finally going to see Nero again, that son who had been in exile for twenty-four years, raised far away from him and thus become a stranger whose features he could not, therefore, reconstruct. He was already beginning to regret having facilitated this approach, the expectation of which made him nostalgic for a distant past. And as long-forgotten episodes and emotions came back to his spiritual retina, the wrinkles on his forehead became deeper, and the reflection of his gaze darker.

Terrible, indeed, were the scenes that unfolded between him and his father, violent and tyrannical as himself, when he forced him to renounce his beloved wife in order to marry Júlia, the daughter of a companion in arms who had died saving his life, and to whom he had sworn to make her his daughter-in-law.

Drúsus, ten years younger, was then only a boy; and with his fourteen years, he could not be the propitiatory victim.

Besides, the obstinate whim of the old soldier had chosen his firstborn to redeem his honor commitment, and it was in vain that he went to Júlia herself, pleading with her to give him up in exchange for a large dowry, so that she could elect another husband.

Whether it was because the girl had grown fond of Semprônius during her stay in the family, or because she coveted the family's brilliant party, she refused to go against old Antônius Bálbus' wishes.

Discouraged at last, and overcome by Fábia's pleas and tears, he finally capitulated, but grudgingly and hurtfully.

At that instant, he saw blurred in mournful clarity the painful hour in which, freed with impotent hatred and anger, he had bound

himself to that undesirable woman.

The three children she bore him were an abomination to him from the cradle on: he fled from seeing them whenever possible; and when Júlia died, after nine years of infernal conjugal life, his first thought flew to Lívia, the fiancée he had been forced to leave behind, and who had remained faithful to him.

By now he had a will of his own, his father had died, and Lívia willingly consented to reestablish the chain of affection that had only been broken by violence.

There was only one condition: - those the rival's children (two boys, 4 and 8, and a girl, 6 years old) should leave the home before she entered it.

Semprônius had agreed without reluctance, and had informed Fábia of the resolution taken, that is, to send the children far away.

The noble lady shook her head negatively and disconsolately, saying:

- I can't prevent you from taking the children away, but in order to spare them a painful existence among their angry father and their stepmother who has a preconceived aversion for them, I'll follow them to our house in Capua, where your aunt has lived since, she was widowed, and with her help I'll finish raising and educating them.

There is only one thing I want to warn you about, and that is that this act of unrighteousness towards immature creatures, who are not to blame for having been born to an unborn woman, will prepare you, in the future, for remorse and possibly difficult situations. Later, when these children come to their senses, they will see you not as their father, but as their executioner. To demand the banishment of these innocents is an act of cruelty and blind selfishness, which can't make Lívia happy either.

This is how Fábia had gone into exile with her grandchildren, and Lívia, haughty and joyful, had settled in her husband's house, who satisfied her every wish and whim, grateful to her constancy and faithfulness.

From this love, thus selfish and tenacious, was born Cáius Lucílius. This advent was welcomed as a favor from the gods.

And Semprônius, always so indifferent when it came to the children of his first marriage, let himself be charmed and captivated by his youngest, showering him with affection and care, which could hardly be presumed in a man of his temperament, austere and violent.

However, that serene maternity was enough for Lívia never to enjoy good health. A year after her birth, her woes became so

serious that Semprônius had to write to Fábia asking her to come and take care of her grandchild and run the house.

The old matron had no way to escape the call, and returned to her son's home, leaving the three banished ones in the care of one of her sisters.

Then, when she saw her last grandchild for the first time and he peacefully held out his arms to her, smiling as if they were old acquaintances, she let herself be enslaved by a deep, irresistible affection.

Lívia still had to suffer fourteen months, to die after four years of marriage, leaving her husband desolate and stunned. In this trance, the maternal ascendant helped her, and little by little, slowly, the love of her adored son brought her back to life, to live for him and by him.

And the son grew up beautiful like a god, intelligent and affectionate, but also obstinate and violent like his father, who, as much as Fábia, tried to guess and satisfy his whims.

Thus, the children of the first marriage were more helpless than ever.

Having provided them materially and abundantly with everything they might need, Semprônius no longer wanted to see them again, and the aversion they had once inspired had turned into complete indifference.

So, when he learned that his daughter Semprônia had run away with one of her father's freedmen, barely fifteen years old and taking all the jewels she could collect, he only took offense at his pride. Out of his mind, he ended up forbidding any steps to capture the runaway, and that no one should ever speak her name in front of him.

Fábia's sister, a kind but shy spirit, had fallen in love, and Drúsus took an interest in the future of his two nephews.

Nero owed him his position in the army, and as for Antônius Bálbus, a melancholy and proud character, he tried to stand on his own, keeping away from his relatives.

All these events were now going on in Semprônius' brain, while something of remorse pricked his dull heart. It seemed to him that his mother's had come true. The son who now, after 24 years, had come into his home, was no longer a child; he was a man of 28, who recognized himself as alien to his father's heart, who perhaps hated him, so much so that he never sought to see him or have any understanding with him.

It was only then, at that moment, that it occurred to him that Nero had gone away from Rome to his brother's house, while Cáius Lucílius was there.

Mere coincidence or a demonstration of hostility, who could say?

The old patrician was extremely apprehensive. What a difficult position was now reserved for him in the face of those two sons with equal rights of affection, but how impossible it would have been to treat them in the same way.

And if, for Nero's sake, he showed more indifference toward Cáius, what would Cáius think? He sighed, running his hand over his forehead, as if to chase away those bad thoughts, when a light touch on his arm caused him to turn and run into Fábia. They sat down.

- Why are you so upset - she asked him with that deep, calm look - is it the wedding of Cáius that worries you so?

- No, my mother: in any case, I think there will always be ways to dominate Dafné. Another is the thought that now obsesses me: it's my behavior, my regret, a kind of remorse, having to face...

- Nero, the exiled, isn't that so? - concluded Fábia bitterly. - So it is, son, that a bad deed brings punishment. Now you must at least try to repair the evil in the best possible way and receive the boy with the affection and friendship to which he's entitled. Nero, as a child, was taciturn, shy, and very vindictive; he would get angry for any kindness done to his brothers, he considered my caresses his exclusive privilege. I know he never forgave me our parting, and though he concealed his resentment in private, I could see it in the way he shunned me when I was last in Rome. Therefore, I was pleased when I heard that you had decided to make this trip. Try, therefore, not to arouse his jealousy and resentment by showing any predilection for Cáius.

- But I can't, I don't know how to appear what I don't feel, just to be nice to him - he replied sullenly. - Besides, what have you been missing? My assistance and my care? And would he appreciate it? The truth is that I've always provided him with everything he needs, and since he joined the army, I've given him an allowance, which allows him to stand out among his colleagues. Now, all there is to hope for is that his marriage to some beautiful young woman will make him forget his old regrets. The matron raised her head:

- I know that this project smiles on you, as much as on Drúsus himself; however, I don't augur it to succeed, since Drusila loves Cláudius and Nero loves "no one". But let us leave this aside now, for something else has brought me here: I received last night the answer from Antônius, who not only rejects, but also acrimoniously rejects your invitation. Not only does he refuse any and every opportunity to meet you, but he declares that he has no father, so much so that he gives up inheritances in order to consider only his wife's

family as relatives.

Angry with rage, Semprônius stood up stiffly on his tiptoes:

- Cheeky! dog! why did you have that topknot?

Old Fábia shook her head in reproach.

- Don't get excited, let's be reasonable, because the truth is that you're only reaping the fruit of what you've planted. Antony has always shown himself to be an ornery boy. Today, he's thirty years old, a father too, and master of his own actions. Of course, it is regrettable that he has such a hard heart; but on the other hand, since he never got to be more intimate with us, we will not have to regret his absence either.

Semprônius heard everything with a heavy frown, and resuming his chair, he said bitterly:

- Júlia's three offspring are nothing like Cáius: perfidious, angry, and aggressive, like their mother, they could never win my affection. Who would not see in Semprônia, running away with a freed slave, the "fac simile" of the woman without honor, who, knowing she had been passed over for another, still refused me my freedom?

- I don't intend to exonerate Júlia - Fábia returned - but her children were not to blame, and Lívia herself is still largely responsible for the disturbances and grief that now beset you. Her rival had passed away, and the innocent little ones had a right to their home, because they benefited from your love.

Maybe Semprônia wouldn't do so badly if she had our constant support and vigilance. My sister, you know, was good, but timid; and the education of her own children only showed her incapable of rectifying and directing such characters. Meanwhile, I'm thinking that the guests are bursting in, and I still want to look at the house arrangements.

While mother and son were chatting like this, Cáius and Cláudius were strolling along the quay, waiting for the galley already interviewed offshore.

Engrossed in themselves, the two boys spoke little. All the former's thoughts converged on the person of that unknown brother, whose existence he only presumed to be evident. Nero's name came to his ears rarely and vaguely, always, and only a few days before his father had told him that his brother would be coming to the wedding. As a child, it's true that he was sometimes surprised that his brother didn't share his fun; but these were child's impressions, ephemeral. They passed. Now, however, she waited for him with impatience and joy. And to this end, he had brought one of his most beautifully and

superbly furnished steeds, to offer it to her as a welcoming testimony. He couldn't imagine, even for a moment, used to only receiving affection from all over the world, that his brother would stop cherishing him, and even more, receiving such a beautiful gift...

Finally, the ship arrived. Once the plank was launched, soon Drúsus, leaning on his daughter's arm and followed by a young officer, descended to the pier. After exchanging cordial greetings with his uncle and his cousin on behalf of Semprônius and Fábia, Cáius turned and, while Drusila exchanged a furtive handshake with Cláudius, he approached his brother who stood at a distance, pale, eyes downcast, and with his hand resting on his sword cup. He enveloped him in a big, curious, and frank look.

Cáius Semprônius Nero, the son so long banished from the paternal home, was a boy of medium height, fair and well-built. His fresh and regular face was framed by brown hair, animated by two lively eyes of the same color. This pleasant appearance was further enhanced by the military uniform. However, his taciturn expression and suspicious gaze, which sometimes changed his physiognomy, gave the impression of violent and skillfully concealed passions.

Cáius, on the other hand, paid no attention to anything but the exterior when he held out his hand and spoke in a cordial tone:

- Accept our welcome. For myself, I don't know the reason that has kept you away from us for so long; but since you're here, at last, I hope you love me as much as I love you. Our father greets you and tells me that he'svery pleased with your presence.

- Yes? - replied Nero, with an indefinable smile.

And with piercing eyes he fixed his brother's frank and loyal face.

With that equivocal answer, Cáius Lucílius was interdicted for a moment, but he didn't have time to ask any question, when he was called by Drúsus to introduce another personage, who kept a discreet distance.

- Dear Cáius, I've brought with me this young man, whom I wish to recommend to your benevolence, as well as to that of Semprônius. Apolônius is a talented artist, to whom I already owe priceless works. He has a relative here whom he wished to visit, and I took the opportunity to commission him to sculpt the busts of your grandmother, yours, and that of your future wife.

Cáius gave a polite greeting and, helping his uncle and his cousin to take the sedan chair, he turned to Nero:

- Apolônius will go in Cláudius' carriage, and as for you, I thought you would prefer to keep me company on horseback.

And he named him two magnificent steeds, which the slaves held

by the reins.

- This black horse is called "Eagle" and I trained him myself: I ask you to accept him as a souvenir of my arrival. As for the white mare, she is my favorite mount and bears my fiancée's name - "Dafné". It was the highest distinction I could bestow upon her.

Nero thanked coldly and mounted up: the motorcade set out.

Carefree and cheerful, Cáius was curling up on his mount, exchanging a greeting with passers-by, or a phrase with Cláudius and the sculptor.

Nero was silent, glaring at his brother, while a deep crease creased his forehead. Was this the brother who had caused "their" exile, the only one entitled to the love of their father and grandmother, and to whom everyone sang praises for his elegance, intelligence, and skill in all games? It was he, yes, who had poisoned her heart ever since she had first heard his name.

And the more she looked at that distinguished figure, exuberant with strength and joy at the same time; at that head worthy of a genius chisel; at those fascinating eyes, the more her gaze was filled with hatred, the more her heart tightened.

Cáius had finally noticed his brother's concern and enigmatic air, but always kind and jovial; if they didn't molest him, he pulled his mount over and spoke in a friendly and natural tone:

- Nero, my brother, clear your brow as you come to our home where father, grandmother and friendly hearts await you. There we'll have fun and pleasures... I notice that you're upset... Why? Missing someone?

Loved and spoiled by everyone, Cáius had, until then, only experienced one setback in life, which was his father's opposition to his plans to marry Dafné. In his inexperience of the world, he could not suspect the nature of the thoughts that tortured his brother. Nero stared at him as if surprised and shook his head:

- What an idea you have! I've no loves, I love no one, and, speaking in theory, I don't even know what love is, since I've never been loved by anyone either.

- No one has ever loved you? - repeated Cáius, at the same time expressing a moment of disbelief. - And our father? and our grandmother?

- Our father - he answered with a slight smile, but in a tone of voice whose harsh vibration had unpleasantly tinged his brother's eardrums - because you believe that? Or do you say it just out of politeness? But... no: I can see by the look in your eyes that you're sincere... But don't sulk, my brother, time will reveal everything. Now,

tell me: - what is the day fixed for the wedding, if your bride is beautiful, what are your relations and if you have good gladiators here...

- You'll find everything, here you'll lack nothing: our circus is luxuriously set up, and I've a tiger, a leopard and a lion, which Father recently bought for me. I fight with them and enjoy the feeling of my superiority, which yields them submissively to my gaze. However, from time to time, the animals have become indolent, perhaps due to overfeeding. As for Dafné, you'll see her: she is a beautiful creature, blond and fresh as Hebé. But you really confuse me, oh, Nero, how can one not love beautiful women? I, for one, confess that I'm more in love with them than with horses.

- But I didn't say that I didn't love women, I said that I've no preference for any woman. And you certainly own a lot of horses, don't you? If you love them so much.

- I think so. I'll show you everything I've, and we'll go for splendid rides. Among other specimens, I have two magnificent horses that are now almost cured from an accident. A rogue remembered to scare them off, they shot and, narrowly, I and Virgília, a childhood friend you'll get to know, were not victimized. Now she is ill and won't leave the house, but you'll see her at the wedding.

Ah! Virgília is a lovely creature, clear, with blue eyes and golden hair! And yet so petite, so delicate, she is a true golden butterfly, as they call her. Before I fell in love with Dafné, I was crazy about her, but she refused my worship and ended up preferring Márcus Fábius - he concluded with a sneer:

Now, tell me in turn what you do there in Rome, tell me about palace life, the Emperor's service....

The young officer shrugged his shoulders:

- Work is always work, whether we are slaves of fate or of duty. In any case, here, as there, you risk your life under someone else's yoke, and it's always more pleasant to live in your own home, with no other master than your own whim... However, such burdens are good for those who don't have a fatherly home and don't know where to land.

Touched by the barely disguised bitterness of this answer, Cáius Lucílius fell silent, apprehensive. At this moment, everything would give to know the reasons for so much sorrow and rancor concentrated on Nero. He knew that he had never lacked anything, neither money nor pleasures; but as for his isolation and jealousy as a son excluded from the home, he could not guess.

He remained silent and completely absorbed, without even noticing that they were passing by the street where Túlia lived. The latter, always informed of what was going on in Semprônius' house, knew

of the motorcade's arrival and stood in wait, to be seen.

Anxiously, breathlessly, she waited for the procession to pass by, and when she finally saw it approach the door, she nervously shook like a leaf.

Hands to her chest, eyes ablaze, she could see nothing but the pale, downcast face and the big, tender eyes of the man who, reclining on his litter, had beside him the faithful image of the blond woman who had brought him contempt and abandonment.

As if he had felt the magnetic fluid of that persistent gaze, the blind man wiggled on the cushions and ran his hand over his forehead, as if to brush away painful memories. He asked if they were still far away... A moment later, the procession was already rounding the corner. Túlia bolted the door. No one else should go through it that day. Then, kneeling, she buried her face in her hands and tried to suppress the sobs that were shaking her. All the pasts had suddenly come back to her. She saw that same young, handsome Drúsus, whose sweet eyes spoke to her of an ardent love; then she saw the same woman to whom she had cleverly disguised the snake that had killed her rival.

Blinded by jealousy, she believed for a moment that she had seen this same rival next to Drúsus, in the litter, forgetting that Sabina no longer existed and that the vision could only be her daughter.

Dafné, the marriage, everything, everything had evanesced the instant she let herself be carried away by a tumultuous passion... And it was she, that cruel and hypocritical woman, who knew like no other how to mask her feelings with appearances of humility and beatitude! "It's a lie! The heart never ages, forgetfulness never exists, the ulcers of the soul never heal" - she monologued...

When the motorcade stopped at Semprônius' door, the old man was already there, waiting for his guests. He himself ran to support his brother to get him off the litter, and then embraced him silently and for a long time.

Then, forgetting Drusila, he turned to someone he had seen arriving and to whom he extended his hand, as if hesitating to embrace him...

Nero was disfigured, his lips trembled almost imperceptibly. With his eyes downcast, he placed his hand on his father's, who, after all, girdled and kissed him on the forehead, without exchanging a word.

Cáius Lucílius had watched this silent scene, full of curiosity. He sensed that things weren't going naturally, but their reciprocal muteness never ceased to cause him great surprise.

He didn't know what they both evoked at that moment, that is: the

father, the cold kiss he had given so many years before on the forehead of the little being who was leaving, exiled from his home and his heart; the son, the instant when that same man with the stern face and fearful look had lifted him up and placed him on Fábia's lap, in the litter of proscription.

He didn't know, then, that he was heading for exile and that his tiny feet would not cross the threshold of his father's house for many long years, where there was no more room for him and where his new landlady would rather find poisonous reptiles than the children of her former rival.

Just then, Fábia appeared in the foyer, with a smile that diluted on her venerable face a halo of almost youthfulness.

With the delicacy of feeling that was peculiar to her, she stepped forward with open arms toward the young man, in whose face she could see the most mixed emotions.

- Dear son - she said - be a thousand times welcome, and may the gods bless this approaching hour.

Then, noticing his labored breathing and the trembling of his lips, she pressed him to her breast and kissed his sweat¨covered face and forehead.

- Calm down, dear son, and believe me, we are all eager to make amends for the past... You know, you've always been as dear to me as Cáius, and your father will cherish you too, I'm sure, as long as he gets to know you better.

That tender voice and that transparent look of maternal affection reacted beneficially in the ulcerated heart of young Nero, who regained control of himself and accompanied his father inside the villa.

XI
The nuptials

A week after Drúsus' arrival, the residence of Márcus Fábius was decked out with lights and flowers.

Long before the time scheduled for the arrival of the procession that was to take the bride and lead her to the paddocks, the street was already crowded with curious onlookers, who were rewarding themselves and were bustling about, laughing, gossiping with the slaves who were hurrying to light the last lamps.

In Virgília's dressing room, profusely lit, Dafné remained seated, her face flushed, barely able to contain herself in her seat.

Many slaves moved there in their eagerness to dress her, under the solicitous guidance of the noble Virgília.

After the last touch-up, she herself adjusted the flowing chaplet and the red bridal veil to the bride's forehead. Then, taking a few steps back, she examined the overall outfit and said:

- Now you're ready. However, you were in such a hurry, you're still waiting for the procession. Look, go to the terrace and try to freshen up, for your face is very scorched. I'm going to get ready too.

Dafné stood up and, after once again looking at herself in the mirror, lifted her head and walked out haughtily, as if proud and convinced of her beauty.

The terrace was deserted, and Dafné leaned against the balustrade and luxuriantly inhaled the fragrance of the gardens; but as soon as she came to her senses, her face changed with an expression of anger and spite.

Could it be that she was thinking of her fiancé? Alas! That fickle, insatiable heart was now on fire for another man, whose serenity and cold indifference had aroused all her passions. Márcus Fábius had never let her know that he even admired her... And yet, what had she not tried to seduce him? In vain she had exhausted all her resources of cunning and gallantry... She broke spears to arouse his jealousy, playing with the person of her fiancé... All in vain. The noble patrician remained invariably impassive, always kind, always invulnerable...

A sound of footsteps interrupted his strange reverie. He turned around and saw Márcus Fábius, who, already prepared for the party, stood there somewhat surprised.

- Is the young bride already dressed? - She won't have long to wait, since the impatient Cáius must be hurrying his friends to bring him the sweetheart of his heart.

She lowered her head.

- For my part, now I'm in no hurry to leave this house, where I wish to stay forever.

A flash of lightning flashed in the eyes of the patrician, who took a step back and leaned against the door.

- I thank you for such a high proof of appreciation for our hospitality: however, I very much doubt this preference, because, in fact, where better can the woman who loves to be judged than in the home of her beloved husband?

She was silent. Then, suddenly coming closer, she said, raising her bold, burning eyes of unmistakable expressiveness.

- I would prefer someone else... Cáius is so violent... so demanding... I thought I loved him, yes, but now I see I was deluded.

Faced with such a direct attack, a deep feeling of irony and compassion was drawn on the countenance of the young patrician, who, profiling himself with austerity, retorted:

- It is you yourself who compels me to tell you that the man who pleases you, now, is neither blind nor free, and more: - that he loves his wife with a love so pure and so deep, that there is for him, in the world, no other woman. Thus, you invest in vain for this man. Moreover, this man is honest enough not to betray a friend, and knowledgeable enough about the human heart not to believe the feelings of a woman so little jealous of her own dignity that she confesses to be disappointed an hour before her engagement.

So don't trample underfoot the great fortune the gods have granted you; try to devote yourself to your husband with all your heart. Otherwise, the gods will punish you cruelly. Cáius is more than worthy of your love and gratitude, for he, beautiful and generous, has disregarded prejudices of caste and birth, and from the mire of vulgarity has raised you to him. Virgília calls me, I'm leaving you. There's only one thing I can and still want to say: don't make it easy on Cáius Lucílius, because it might just cost you your life.

He turned his back on her in a flash and left. Dafné was stunned. How could she? He had understood everything, and in this case his indifference could only come from his repugnance? She was filled with anger inside her; she wished she could tear her clothes off, roll on the cobblestones. However, a little bit of reasoning made him realize that if the reason for such furors became public, the marriage would be frustrated. Then, for the first time in his life, he took control of himself and limited himself to crunching his fingers, roaming the terrace like a caged beast.

From outside, a confusing rumble and flute-accompanied chanting faded his thoughts. It was the procession arriving. Running her

hands over her congested face, she tried to put her face back together, and a few minutes later, she appeared shy, eyes downcast before her fiancé and his friends, including Nero, Cláudius, and Apolônius. The last two could not conceal their admiration for the bride. As for Nero, he was fascinated by the silhouette of Virgília, whom he had only just met and who welcomed him with special attention. However, he wasn't allowed to prolong his ecstasy, because his place was with his bride. Followed by songs, music and cheers from the crowd, the procession resumed its march, preceded by children who lined the road with flowers.

In Semprônius' house, joy had reached its peak. There was a profusion of flowers, vases, polychrome lamps, and singing and music, which alternated at the entrance, in the rooms, and in the corridors. A real boiling beehive! From one side to the other, feverishly, slaves distributed drinks and goodies, alms, and flowers.

In the salon of honor, the sumptuous tables reverberated, covered with rich tableware. Fortified wines served in golden goblets, all refined cuisine, provoking praise, and acclaim.

Semprônius, the host, had spared and forgotten nothing, against his habits of thrift and frugality, to give a demonstration of his opulence. Nero found a way to sit next to Virgília and never tired of contemplating the beautiful creature who, glowing with spirituality, tried to talk to her neighbors. Even before he had met her, she had aroused his interest, as her brother's girlfriend and superior to the seductions that characterized him, he had preferred her to someone else.

His first impression had been profound, and so, with growing admiration, he followed all the gestures and phrases of the elegant Virgília, who, by the way, was having one of her happiest days. Wearing a white tunic with silver trimmings, an emerald necklace was around her waist.

Her neck and arms, made of nacre, had identical ornaments, and a superb Greek-style diadem held up her black hair, which shone under the intense light of the chandeliers.

Cáius had nicknamed her "golden butterfly," and she deserved it for the slenderness of her figure and the gracefulness of her gestures. "How could his brother exchange such a lovely creature for this one of exuberant form and vulgar beauty?" - thought Nero, more and more immersed in his rapture.

As for Dafné, she was positively disliked.

Virgília, however, hardly suspected the deep and dangerous impression her person made on that misanthropic and taciturn boy,

who deserved nothing but deep and sincere compassion. He knew from Fábia that the exiled son of Semprônius had led a lonely and affectless existence, and that he was now in his father's house almost as a stranger, and therefore embarrassed. Only the day before Metela had told him that, introduced by her brother to his house, Nero had often returned there and then spent the rest of the day in the city. And more: that both she and Agripa had not been unaware of the jealousy and bitterness that overflowed from his heart, due to an unjust predilection for Cáius.

She even suggested that he try to distract the boy by showing him affectionate affection, even because he was very sensitive to any affectionate demonstrations.

A glance at Metela, sitting there in front of him, was as if reminding him of that request. She immediately turned to the young officer, telling him, seductive smile:

- Always sad and thoughtful... Metela is right when she says that you must be bullied to get you to quit. Well, you should know that you'll have to come with me. I, for one, like to joke and laugh, much more than she does. She's so pretty that she even discusses science and politics with the men, helps her husband to solve business deals, and, on top of that, attends the classes that the philosopher Flaminius is going to give to the children. Well, I detest these great and grave matters, I like to have fun, I always prefer a chariot drawn by fiery horses to all the philosophers in the world. And you like the circus? They say that Rome has the best gladiators... oh, happy are those who, like you, can live there. It's enough to be the capital of the country. But one day I'll go to Rome too.

- Military life doesn't give us much leisure to have fun, but, even so, I can give you the information you want about the circus and other Roman amusements - answered Nero, who was following the young woman's loquacity with burning eyes.

- Thank you, but first, go and visit us, because the son of our dear Semprônius can only be considered a doubly precious guest.

The boy's transparent gaze soon clouded over.

- If you let me glimpse a friendly welcome in your home, I can only attribute it to the benevolence due to a stranger, a miserable bird of prey, who only knows that he has left his cradle under this roof. Expelled from his nest and abandoned to his fate for long years, the exiled son can't do justice to the friendship of his father's friends, since he has always been for them an unknown, an ignored.

The last words were spoken in a harsh and aggressive tone. Virgília, surprised and at the same time penalized, leaned toward him

and murmured:

- What are you saying, Nero? Why should you cloud our party with words and concepts as cruel as they are unfair? The truth is that, for all your father's friends, you'll always be his son, as long as you Cáius. These friends may regret that they didn´t know you sooner, but since you're here, they not only hold out their hands to you, but they also open their hearts to you. Be assured that you'll find sincere friendships among us, and don't let that pessimistic mood cloud and poison you. I can't admit that Semprônius isn't your friend.

- Oh, but I didn't say that - he replied with a smug smile - my father is very kind and treats me with all the attentions of pragmatics; nor would it be for lack of politeness on his part that I would feel better there in Metela's house, in yours or in Vérus', wherever it may be, in short, then in the seclusion of the paternal home... No! what drives me away from here is the conviction of my superfluity, transparent in every look, in every gesture of that father, as if to tell me that he has only one son and that, if the fortune belongs to two, the heart beats only for one...

At that moment, his glance, sharp and glacial, shifted to Semprônius, who enthusiastically raised his cup and proposed a toast to the newlyweds.

Cáius Lucílius responded to his father's affectionate gaze, gazing into his large, tender eyes. He rose in turn, jubilant and radiant, proposing to the health of the best of his present, past and future fathers.

The dialogue between Nero and Virgília had been conducted quietly, and no one had noticed it.

According to the direction of the young officer's gaze, the girl stared for a moment at the expressive and beautiful face of her fiancé. Then she said with barely concealed admiration, as if to justify Semprônius' exclusive affection:

- Cáius is so seductive that he thrills every heart....

Nero leaned forward, as if trying to hide the spite that blushed his cheeks.

- I thank you, Virgília - he said with sharp irony - for having warned me so clearly and promptly who is the ugly one next to that Support, so that I'll give up being like him, even your father's darling. How fortunate that you have your beauty to plead his cause and justify the misfortune of a rejected child!

Red clouds passed over Virgília's retina.

- You're unfair and mean - she said, bringing her hand to her blushing face - mean, yes, and at this moment I can't give you the answer

you deserve. Go, then, to our house the day after tomorrow. I'll invite Metela, always sensible and just, and we will talk then, as good friends, about this prevention against your father. It is possible that he isn't as guilty as you think, I really want to believe that you ignore many causal precedents of his attitude, and you'll eventually convince yourself of your injustice. As for Cáius, he's a very nice and affectionate creature, as long as you don't irritate him, so he only deserves your affection.

An unexpected question interrupted the conversation, which became more generalized, and no longer had time to resume the subject.

The tables were cleared, and the guests dispersed in groups through the rooms, terraces, and gardens.

Touching his fiancée, looking for an opportunity to talk to her, as much as he could, Cláudius approached her and told her between kindness and anxiety.

- You look stunning, Dafné! I've been waiting for a long time to approach you and, not only express my admiration, but also make a request: - you know that I've debts... and since Cáius has already sent a box of coins to your chamber for your pins, I hope you'll put some of that money into a white handkerchief that I propose to bring you... And if you add to that a kiss, I'll consider myself happy and well compensated.

The girl blushed and replied:

- Well, you can go and get the money whenever you want.... The right moment to do so, no one can know better than yourself, since you're Cáius' best friend.

Cláudius leaned over gallantly, looking as if he were reciting a tome of poetry, but from under his pupils, a steely gaze was darting, expressive and such as to convince Dafné that she had before her a gentleman, with whom it would be risky to prevaricate or have fun.

- You're wrong, beautiful patrician: it is up to the woman, not the man, to give the passwords... Sometimes, the desire to crush someone is dangerous, and, by the way, I must remind you that a piece of handkerchief got stuck to the animal's barb... Semprônius jealously guards this piece of handkerchief that you know well... If the creditors squeeze me, I'll be forced to give the scarf to a certain Rutuba, who, for reasons still obscure to me, is after it like a real leopard.

Dafné's hands crunched with rage.

- I'll tell you when you can get the money.

- And what about the kiss? You're beautiful, you know it, so I won't give up on him.

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- I'll tell you when you can get the money.

- And what about the kiss? You're beautiful, you know it, so I won't give up on him.

She turned her back on him with a disdainful look.

Feeling the need to calm down, she went to one of the unoccupied rooms, but, to her surprise, she bumped into Cáius, who was giving Rutuba some orders.

- Is there something you want, dear Dafné? - he said gently.

- I was looking for you - he answered with a charming smile - and since I've found you in the company of your savior, give me permission to offer him a souvenir of this happy day.

He detached one of the bracelets from his arm:

- Here you're, Rutuba, and when you possess a bride, give her this jewel in memory of the instant you saved my husband's life.

The young Roman received the gift with deep reverence.

- Noble lady, I can only witness my gratitude with a vow of fidelity to your service. Believe me, I'll watch over you like a dog, not only for the master, but for his wife, whom I consider the greatest treasure of your home.

The look that accompanied these words and the tone in which he spoke to them made Dafné shudder.

Cáius noticed nothing, and, satisfied with what he saw and considered a demonstration of love, he took her in his arms and led her into the salon.

XII

The Fall

A fortnight passed by.

In the courtyard of the stables, surrounded by his friends, Cáius Lucílius showed them his magnificent horses, satisfied and proud to own them.

In a group were Cláudius, Apolônius and Nero. The latter, always withdrawn and gloomy, kept a certain distance, not interfering in the conversation, except by making a few absentminded remarks to prove that he also understood the subject.

The slaves had already paraded the best and most beautiful steeds when Cáius exclaimed enthusiastically:

- Now you'll see the most beautiful, but also the bravest of my horses. É "Hurricane", a name I gave him because he can't tolerate any other rider but me. This I say, although I've gone over it only once, when I had to use all my strength and skill, so as not to kiss the ground.

Four slaves were trying, now, to pull the superb animal, which caused general admiration.

It was a colt with black and shiny hair, like a raven's wing, with bluish highlights; its thin, nervous legs looked like the work of sculpture; but its bloodshot, bloodthirsty eyes, as well as its breathless breathing, denoted impetuosity, and rebellion. Raising his head restlessly, shaking his thick mane, neighing loudly, and scraping his hooves on the ground, it was as if he was challenging the riders.

Nero also approached the animal, stroked its neck, and said, with a wry smile:

- You say then, Cáius, that he doesn't tolerate another pawn?

- Yes, and I also said that I only rode him once, convinced of the risk I took. All the others who have tried it, up to now, have been spat at, and one slave, an excellent picker, even spat at him after his fall.

- It's just that he was a banana - said Nero acrimoniously... - You're obviously not a military man, otherwise you wouldn't be afraid of such foolishness. Of course, it's just that you don't know how to drive it... And you'll let me prove it to you... Fear? I've never been, nor can I be, afraid of this "Hurricane" of yours.

Cáius bit his lips and blushed slightly.

- I think I've demonstrated many times that I'm not a poltroon, and none of you here can accuse me of being pusillanimous. What I've tried to do is to avoid useless risks, riding an extraordinarily vigorous animal.

- I know, you only use those that Dad considers harmless. What amazes me is that you've spent the fame of an almost centaur. However, I repeat, as indomitable as he's, let me ride him and you'll see how good this wrist of mine is.

- You? - and measured his brother from top to bottom - because you think you're stronger than me?

And the other, already irritated:

- The volume of bones has never been a testament to dexterity...

- Let's not argue any more - returned Cáius with quivering lips - let's try the bones of the one with the most skill. I'll ride first and go to the house of Márcus Fábius, from there I'll bring, as proof of the journey, a bouquet of flowers for Grandma; then you'll do the same thing. But look, Nero, try to win the match, because otherwise you won't be a braggart... Hello, you open the gate...

He approached the animal, grabbed his mane, and mounted, leaping up. The horse bent its back to the weight of the young athlete, who seemed to be hitched to its back, did a few hitches and already pressed by the rider's powerful knees, let go at a wide trot, obedient to the iron hand that guided it.

Nero lowered his head, frowning, and leaning against the wall remained silent and oblivious to the comments provoked by the endurance qualities of the horse and the agility and vigor of the rider.

After only ten minutes, the trot of the mount could be heard coming at full gallop. With his face flushed, Cáius Lucílius reappeared, fully in control of his role and of the animal, which, skimming, curled up in capricious movements, to finally stop at the mere touch of a hand.

Two slaves rushed forward and held the animal, while the knight stood up with the same elegance and agility with which he had ridden. Only the sweat that beaded his forehead could indicate the effort that had been expended.

- Here it is - he exclaimed joyfully, as he waved a bouquet of roses in his "bouquet" of roses and a white handkerchief in her hands. - The "bouquet" is for Grandma, and the handkerchief is to be returned to Virgília, who is waiting for you there with Fabius.

Nero didn't hesitate and mounted deftly, but as soon as the animal noticed the change of rider, it began to neigh and neigh furiously.

The officer's face became purplish, and the veins in his hands, thin and well-groomed, swelled up... However, after a brief struggle, the animal obeyed.

The people gathered around Cáius, laughing, and chatting; but a

quarter of an hour, half an hour went by, and? no Nero! One of the patrician's present ventured:

- He's sure to dine there with Virgília, to demonstrate that a ride on the "Hurricane" is purely an aperitif.

- Well, I rather accept the hypothesis of an accident - exclaimed the sculptor. - It's just that, to dominate that animal, only a musculature like yours, Cáius, which I ask permission to fix in marble. I've long cherished the idea of sculpting a group representing the centaur Cheron teaching Achilles to ride. The models, however, have been lacking. Now, if you want to lend yourself to this, riding the "Hurricane", I think I'll have made my fortune and would be infinitely grateful to you...

- For me, there is no doubt; and if I can be useful to you, count on me right now, also because it would be honorable for me to represent Achilles, Homer's hero, who died in the prime of his life, covered in glory...

- Look! Isn't it Grácus, Márcus Fábius' servant, who comes running?

- What's up? - shouted Cáius, marching towards him.

- Your brother came into the courtyard, but when he tried to pull his horse up to greet my masters, the damn animal, which snorted like a bull, stumbled, and landed on the ground with the poor boy. And it seems that the tumble was clumsy because he hit his head on a step of the stairs, and when we picked him up, he was unconscious and covered in blood. I ran to tell you, and, as for the horse, it is on its way here, brought by two slaves.

- Get the litter ready - said Cáius, looking slightly pale.

And turning to his friends, he added:

- I'll tell Grandma about this unfortunate occurrence, and Dad, if he's here, although Nero got what he deserved: he provoked me for no reason, he made me risk my life and his... I cast my lot; but, you see, this isn't the first time he has shown me his dislike and tried to hurt me.

- Besides, this was to be expected - said the sculptor - since Nero has only mediocre strength. But what do you want if the boy is presumptuous?

When Cláudius crossed the hallway, he told him in a few words what had happened.

- It will be unfortunate if he dies this fall, after an absence of twenty-four years - grumbled the musician shaking his head.

- Explain yourself better... come on: I don't know what you mean. Nobody forced Nero to ride the "Hurricane". Therefore, what happened is a result of his own stubbornness and progeny. But tell me: - is

Dad at home?

- No.

- In that case, I charge you to warn him as soon as he arrives, and then we'll talk about your singular warning.

He walked away, annoyed, and went to his wife's quarters.

Dafné was in the dressing room, surrounded by clothes, flowers and jewelry, while some pale and distressed slave girls were busy dressing her. Two were combing and grooming her hair, while a third was caressing her already naturally coral-colored cheeks and lips.

Cáius stopped at the door, unpleasantly surprised.

- Dear Dafné, my brother has just suffered an unfortunate disaster; he fell off his horse and was seriously injured and has been taken to the house of Fábius. I came to warn you that I'm going there, and I probably won't be back until tonight. Now, tell me, why should you desecrate the gifts of nature in this way, exchanging the rosy freshness of your mimosa and the cherry red of your lips for that cheap crimson that doesn't make you any more beautiful? I know this is part of the patrician "toilette"; but, a young and beautiful woman might as well leave these wraps to the declining forties.

- Is Nero dead? - she asked nonchalantly, as she repelled the slave with her hand, pointing to another bottle. The girl immediately took a small brush and began to dye his eyebrows black.

Cáius couldn't hold back a grimace.

- So, do you believe that if Nero had died, I would be here talking to you? But look, those eyebrows you make in this way are simply abominable...

Dafné stared at him and sketched the kindest of smiles...

- For it was the sculptor who, when modeling my bust, said that the black eyebrows fit me wonderfully. You see, this is an artist's opinion...

- Well, I'm flattered that it's me and not the sculptor you have to please... Those eyebrows - he added smiling - don't satisfy me, and when I come back here, I don't want to see them. And now, see you later...

He leaned over, kissed her jasper shoulder, and left.

She grimaced, stretched her legs indolently, and said - I'm tired, there's no time to lose; the "gentleman" has gone, and Fábia probably goes with him; Semprônius is at the Forum... Hello! Take me some wine and sweets up to the terrace and you can leave, except Etra, who should stay there to shake me.

The orders were carried out, and soon she was on the terrace,

alone with the designated servant, a Nubian with a saucy physiognomy and whose round, lively eyes indicated cunning and duplicity.

- Etra - she said, holding up a coral necklace - I'm very pleased with your dedication and vigilant assistance: continue to serve me faithfully and count on my reward... Now, run quickly and go and let Cláudius know that I'm expecting him, as soon as Cláudius has actually left.

Then, you stand guard, so that nobody comes to disturb us... Do you understand?

The black woman threw herself at his feet, kissed his hands with exclamations of joy, and, after having sworn dedication until death, ran to the gallery where Cláudius was wandering from one side to the other, reading a parchment.

Pretending to look for something, the shrewd black woman walked past him and whispered that her mistress was waiting for him on the terrace, as soon as her master's sedan had left.

He stooped down and continued strolling, but just ten minutes later he descended into the garden and wandered into a thick alley. Then, creeping through bushes and clumps, he reached a window and leaped out of it to find himself in the adjoining room on the terrace.

Dafné was there, reclining indolently on the lounger, and held out her hands to him, smiling:

- Here, together, my beautiful musician, since we are always given a few hours of freedom after all....

Cláudius sat down on a stool, wrapped his arms around her, kissed her on the mouth... Fired with voluptuousness, she responded to his caresses and, smoothing his blonde, ringed hair, murmured:

- I love you...

They could not suspect that someone had surprised Cláudius when he was sneaking into the garden, and that at that very instant two eyes of fire were diving through the curtains.

- Poor Cáius! - murmured Rutuba, indignant as well as disgusted - married only three weeks and already miserably betrayed! I'm glad I wasn't deluding myself... The scoundrel took advantage of your absence... But don't worry, bitch, you haven't completely exhausted your husband's patience yet... But I can foresee that the hour of revenge is approaching...

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Nero, completely unconscious, was taken to Virgília's home, who personally attended to his extensive and copiously bleeding wound.

- Mighty gods! - she cried all the time - he seems to be dead... - And she stared in horror at the wounded man's face.

- No - said her husband, who held her exhausted head in his hands - his heart is still beating, and I really think that he will come to his senses soon. What we need to do is moisten his lips and temples. But, I can see that emotion troubles you, leave this to me...

- I thought he was dead, but since you assure me otherwise, I also try to help you...

Thanks to this care, the boy soon opened his eyes.

- Where am I?

And he scanned his surroundings with a sad and tired look.

- At home, my friend - answered Fabius, raising his head, while Virgília brought the cup to his lips and added, laughing:

- Drink, rest, and everything else will be fine.

- Thank you, Virgília... Ah! how good we feel here... I wish I could stay here for a long time... always...

He let out these words in a deep sigh.

Márcus Fábius, to whom his wife had told that wedding conversation, which so clearly expressed the innermost sorrow of the unfortunate young man, immediately shook his hands:

- Cheer up then, my dear, because you'll only get out of here completely recovered. And now, my Virgília, go away, because it's time to make him more comfortable, until the doctor arrives, who can't delay either.

An hour later, the wounded man was thinking and feeling feverish, when a noise at the bedside caused him to open his eyes to contemplate the venerable countenance of Fábia before him, with Cáius Lucílius beside him, very pale and breathless.

The good lady's eyes were overwhelmed with tears. A violent tremor soon took hold of the wounded man: his face was congested, his breathing was heavy, and he spoke in a broken voice:

- Don't cry Grandma, it's all my fault, it's always my fault, because nature has given me neither beauty nor skill, nor vigor nor affections, and it's only fair that I alone should suffer the consequences of my misfortune. If I die, Dad will not stop living more or worse for it; I don't even think he will shed a tear, as long as he has his idol left, safe and sound...

The matron's gentle, deep gaze seemed to want to probe for an instant the troubled countenance of her grandson.

She asked Cáius, who was watching and listening in dismay, to step

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She asked Cáius, who was watching and listening in dismay, to step aside, leaving her alone with her brother.

Then she sat down on the edge of the bed, and drawing him to her, she said to him in all gentleness

- I see that the tears choke you: weep, then, my dear son, let the weeping wash the wounds of your heart; let it vent, at last, so that your word may purge itself of the gall you bear in your soul. This will be like a cooling balm for your troubled spirit. Silence is, many times, superior to our strength. Don't be ashamed of those tears that have only me as a witness, I understand your bitterness and even though your state requires absolute rest, I prefer that you get it off your chest, that you tell me everything that has been done to you and that you're revealing to me. Then, I hope you'll also listen to me with more patience.

The intimate agitation that, since his arrival, exacerbated the young man's nerves; the trauma of the fall and the consequent hemorrhage; all of this together took away his self-control at that moment. Then, all that he had been holding back in his heart for many years burst out of his eyes in torrents of tears. Fábia, with loving hands, wiped away his tears, until they calmed down and he could finally speak:

- You don't know, nor can you imagine how much I've suffered, what I've embittered in this my isolation of long years: in childhood,

not a caress, not a word of affection! The aunt, as you well know, was never kind to us, always absorbed in her prayers and sacrifices; she hated us, she drove us away, and when she favored us and tried to please us, she did it to spite one for the benefit of the other, always arbitrary, always capricious... How many times we heard her say: "wretches, be happy that you still have a father to support you, because the truth is that you're the spurs of a hated trunk and, as such, repulsive to it". Even the slaves knew this and mistreated us with impunity. Later, among colleagues, how can I say about the aculeus they used to bite me when they referred to their families and asked about mine, amazed at my isolation? They wanted to know who my parents were, and I could barely reconstruct their features? Oh! but I need, I want, I must tell you:

- if, despite all this, I'm here, it is because I still harbored a vague hope of being able to win the father's affection. Now, however, I see that I've been a fool... In a father's heart there is only room for one son, and this father doesn't even try to dissimulate this unjust and hateful predilection. You yourself, Grandma, you're also fascinated by this favorite of the gods, who knows how to captivate those who approach him. For myself, I know that I'm ugly, clumsy, and unpleasant; musty in comparison with the beautiful Cáius, to whom everything in life seems to smile and, from there, to understand the reason for the preference, or rather, and better, for my repudiation. You, in all kindness, try to dissimulate, to mitigate the deplorable situation, you treat me with tenderness, but, Grandma, no one can deceive the heart. I see, when Cáius comes to us, the deep eyes that Dad lays on her, and I see the mute adoration with which you listen to her voice? And as for me... I suffer. What else can I tell you? And also, what for?

He fell silent, exhausted on the pillows. Fábia kissed him on the forehead.

For her, all this was the fruit of Semprônius' resolution and unusual procedure. The injustice done to her children had poisoned their hearts, while it had created implacable enemies for her beloved son. He understood that a deep chasm had been dug between the two brothers, and his heart was filled with bitterness. He squeezed his grandson's feverish hand and wanted to say something to him, but he didn't have time to, because at the same moment the door opened and Semprônius entered. His aquiline eyes were fixed on his son's bed, but his face didn't show the slightest emotion.

He approached the patient and, leaning over, said:

- Had you not been injured, and I would have begun by

reproaching you.... How could you admit that, out of sheer fatuity, you would risk your own life and the life of your brother? You're the oldest and I always assumed you were the wisest.

A glimmer of hatred, which the father didn't notice, shone in his son's eyes:

- Your reproach could only be justified if the wounded man was Cáius Lucílius... But since I'm the victim, I hope you won't be to upset. Besides, this isn't the first time I've been ill, and we should always be prepared to face the death of a soldier. I'm just a... soldier.

XIII

The skillful musician

A few days after the episodes of the preceding chapter, we find Drúsus, his daughter Drusila and Cáius gathered on the terrace.

The blind man was dozing on a sofa, where a slave was moving a large feather duster to keep the flies away.

Drusila, a very beautiful and somewhat pale young woman, was sitting by the balustrade, holding a bowl of grain on her knees, which she was playing with a flock of pigeons, some of which, more daring, came to peck at the palm of her hand.

Sitting at his feet, on a stool, was young Cláudius, all dolled up and perfumed as usual.

Fingering a small golden harp, he sang one of his favorite arias in a voice tinged with melancholy. When he finished, he put the instrument aside and, leaning toward the girl, said, giving her eyes an expression of tenderness in which a shrewd observer would have guessed the intention:

- Drusila, it's been a long time since I heard a madrigal from your lips.... Have you banished from your memory the night of my departure from Rome and the letter you sent me through Fábia's messenger? Don't take it as an offense to remember a time that was so happy for me...

She blushed:

- What do you say, Cláudius? How could I forget one of the most grateful hours of my life? I still love you, as always, but the truth is that both Dad and Grandma are opposed to our marriage. In alliance with Uncle, they want to tie me to Nero, and I confess that I don't have the heart to disobey them. “My uncle,” he said, “I'm happy to accept your project and I'll be happy to satisfy your wishes, which are also my father's, by safeguarding his enormous fortune for a son-in-law of Semprônius; however, it is my duty to be frank with you and tell you that I don't love Drusila, despite her undeniable beauty. I would prefer it if it were not so, also because I esteem in her the moral qualities, the filial love that she has for him and that makes me persuade that she will be a model wife. However, I don't have the heart to vibrate this love decanted by the poets and, therefore, if Drusila is content with only the esteem and admiration of her husband, she will have in me only an indulgent husband and a faithful and dedicated friend.”

- Well, Cláudius - he continued, lowering his eyes - these words of Nero's and the discreet delicacy with which he has treated me, have

led me to the conclusion that, if I've to renounce the man I love, I must prefer a husband who doesn't demand from me what I could never give him.

Cláudius walked away silently and rested his head on the rim of the harp... His heart was beating violently. Disappointment and anger at the same time. Was it possible that Drusila could let herself be seduced by Nero and try to conceal her inclinations under the pretext of false obedience? The woman who has her chosen man snatched away can't speak so calmly...

Dominating herself with an effort of will, she answered in a low voice:

- I can only do justice to your intentions, and respect your wishes, by being content to receive the chosen one from your relatives, in the hope that they will not claim, between themselves, more than a simple bond of respectful esteem; but I think you're deluding yourself when you suppose your cousin to be free from a violent passion. I doubt even now that he still wants to marry you, or, if he does (he smiled bitterly), you'll have to play the same game, that is, ¨ you'll take him in because you're obliged to renounce what pleases you, and he will take you to drown the wild passion that has entirely engrossed him.

The girl raised her eyes in admiration, but no emotion changed her melodious voice, as she asked:

- But, who do you suppose Nero loves? He, so cold, so reserved... It even seems impossible! In any case, I ask you to explain yourself, because the matter is serious.

The musician was startled: if this news was received with coldness, then it was obvious that she didn't love her cousin.

- I know what I'm saying and why I'm saying it: yesterday, as you know, Cáius and I went to visit Nero, who is getting better. We found him on the terrace of his kind hosts, comfortably installed and assisted by them. As we were saying goodbye, Márcus made a point of showing us a cameo he had bought this morning, and as we passed into the next room, Virgília stood next to the convalescent, and I saw that, at his request, she brought the jug to his lips, while supporting his head with the most charming of smiles. At this, I think she was called by the nanny, and went out, leaving her veil on the stool near the bed. Nero, seeing himself alone, took the veil, kissed it passionately, and as soon as he sensed footsteps, he left it to lie on the pillows, giving a long sigh. Moreover, observe for yourself the expression with which he follows the eyes of Márcus Fábius, and you'll be convinced of what I'm telling you.

- Poor Nero! - murmured Drusila with such a natural compassionso free of jealousy, that Cláudius had not the slightest doubt.

- To him, you clearly don't love him... And me, much less, of course.

When we arrived here, she still showed me signs of love, and I could see in her eyes that she wasn't lying. But, praise Pluto and all the deities! - who could have dethroned me in a few weeks?

He mentally reviewed all the boys that could rival him, and ended up concluding with a nonchalant conclusion:

- Yes, Virgília is quite seductive, and her fire-red curls have already set more than one fire, besides, she makes her conquests as if she doesn't understand them, smiling, always smiling. Certainly, you also don't ignore that Cáius is crazy about her, and I think that, even today, he esteems her much more than that Dafné, who won't hold him for long. Meanwhile, Virgília has passed him over for Márcus Fábius...

- Did Cáius love Virgília? - Drusilla, already possessed by a strange emotion, glistened, while Cláudius ' shrewd gaze also noticed the pallor of her face and the slight tremor of her lips.

- Ah! - he murmured angrily - is that him? I quickly lifted the hare... You'll see, you fickle woman, that, for one reason or another, you'll be mine, and you'll pay double for your frivolity. As for the removal of Nero, that is up to me...

He stood up, feigning great emotion:

- Sorry, but I need solitude.

Drusila, sincerely convinced that her confession had fallen on the young musician's heart, shook his hand.

- Poor Cláudius - she murmured to herself, following him with moist eyes - if you didn't love me, I would be more honest with you...

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Days after this interview, a regular visitor to the manor house of Márous Fábius, we went there to meet Cláudius on the same terrace, Nero's favorite place.

The patrician couple was away on a visit to Metela, and Cáius had accompanied them. The musician had insisted on staying, pretending to keep the convalescent company.

They chatted:

- So, how are you doing? - he asked.

- As well as the nature of evil allows. And how are you and everyone else at home? Uncle, my dear Drusila?

- Knowing you're out of danger, everyone is happy and content, and only Drusila seems a bit melancholic and apprehensive?

At these words, the sick man sketched a slight smile.

The fool! - thought Cláudius - thinks it's because of him...

Hardly suspecting his insouciance, Nero ran his hand over his forehead and said, sighing:

- You don't yet know, my friend, that my father and Uncle Drúsus wish me to marry the beautiful little cousin, and I suppose, indeed, that such an arrangement suits me. It is time for me to make my home; this life of mine is unstable, laborious, and hardly ever the full realization of all that we long for. However, Drusila, kind and loving, will be a devoted and faithful wife. So far, at least, I've not noticed any other preferences in her, so I think I'll be able to win her a legitimate affection. I also intend to abandon my military service and acquire that splendid estate adjoining that of Fabrícius Agripa, because I want to live with the people of my new relations. It's a plan that my uncle will not fail to approve, because I know that he also wants to stay close to Fábia, whose trips to Rome are becoming more and more difficult because of her age.

Cláudius, who had listened to everything with particular interest, shook his hand and said:

- This spontaneous confession of yours puts me in a very embarrassing situation because I see that you're ignorant of everything and that you're going to commit great imprudence by settling here in Herculaneum after you're married. However, the duty of a friend tells me to speak frankly and spare my friend any future grief. Prevention is always better than cure...

Nero frowned and said harshly:

- Speak up...

- For my part, I think you would do better living with your wife back in Rome, since Drusila's pallor and melancholy are nothing more than the consequence of the crazy passion that your brother Cáius inspires in her, that Eros to which no woman can resist.

The pale face of the sick man blushed brightly.

- You say that Drusila loves him madly? But how can you know this? What has happened to favor you to speak with such conviction?

- Well, don't you know that we, the poets, and musicians, are the eternal confidants of female hearts? If we possess the gift of singing and expressing in harmonious verse what is in their souls, in secret... So, listen to how I was able to unravel the mystery: About a fortnight ago, early in the morning, I was called to Drúsus' room, who was feeling unwell. You know the blind man's passion for music. I tried to

perform one of the arias that he most enjoys, while Drusila was amusing herself with her pigeons. As soon as I sensed him asleep, I stopped singing and started talking to Drusila, trying to calm her in her sadness. She began by defending herself, but ended up revealing her plan to marry you, adding that she was only conforming because she was convinced that you were an indifferent creature and incapable of demanding from her what she could never grant you, only to consider this union a case of pure economic and family convenience. In short: from all this talk, what I could extract, in substance, was that she was in love with someone else. But - I conjectured - who was the lucky man? I was trying to guess when she herself gave me the thread of the matter. How? simply when, with her eyes downcast and a little confused, she asked if Cáius Lucílius had fallen in love with the rustic Dafné long ago. I replied that, in my opinion, this love of Cáius was nothing more than the whim of a crazy, overly pampered boy. Accustomed to having his every wish fulfilled, Semprônius' opposition altered his health and everyone ended up settling for this exotic and absurd marriage. Moreover, it is no secret that Fábia and Semprônius have a delirious love for their "idol".

Stressing the words of his speech, the cunning Cláudius observed, maliciously pleased, the transformation that the other's physiognomy was undergoing.

- If you could see what I saw in that episode of the car with the horses in a rage... Cáius and Virgília were in mortal peril, it was obvious that the sling was falling apart... Old Semprônius stood before the picture as if petrified! It was a marble statue! Then, in a voice broken, in a desperation that I could never attribute to him, he promised a fortune to whoever managed to stop the rampaging pair.

And Fábia then? - She had fallen to her knees, hands clasped in supplication, weeping, obsessing to the gods to spare her beloved grandson. Meanwhile, Cáius only had eyes for Virgília, who, so as not to hinder his movements, had bent down and let herself be wrapped around his waist. Nevertheless, and yet, when the reins were broken, he lifted the young woman and held her close to his heart, in the attitude of one who seemed to say: - "To die together like this is a blessing!"

Virgília, for her part, was radiant during all her anguish: her large eyes locked on those of her companion, as if he were, at that moment, the anchor of salvation. His hair, loose in flowing waves, seemed to want to wrap him in a halo of gold. It was in this trance that all doubt vanished from my mind: - the passion of Cáius for the "golden butterfly" was never extinguished, and she, the "butterfly", also

loved him perhaps more than she supposed, which after all isn't very flattering for the tranquility of the noble and trustworthy Márcus Fábius... Now, to better convince you of the reality, I want you to swear me to absolute secrecy.

As the musician spoke, Nero became livider and more disfigured. His labored breathing and the brightness of his pupils indicated the torment that was beating his spirit.

I swear to you that I'll keep absolute secrecy... '

- Well - continued Cláudius, as if he didn't think he was alone - Dafné had seen him and Virgília on their way back from their walk... Naturally, they exchanged madrigals, and it wasn't difficult for her, Dafné, to understand that the pair loved each other. Possessed, then, driven mad by jealousy, she threw her handkerchief in front of the horses and got the check... Here, however, I must return to Drusila:

- when, in answer to your question, I told you what I thought about the love between Cáius and Dafné (without mentioning, of course, what I've just revealed to you), the impression made by my words and the gesture you made, compressing your heart, gave me the key to the enigma. Okay, I wouldn't say anything to you in this particular regard, if you weren't the first to talk about your wedding plans. It seemed to me, then, that I would be failing in my duty of loyalty if I kept quiet about what I knew.

There was a long silence between the two of them. Nero was the first to break it, saying in a cavernous voice:

- I appreciate the proof of friendship you've just witnessed to me; as for Drusila, she is very mistaken if she thinks of marrying me. No, absolutely not! In fact, have no idea of a woman who, madly in love with another man, still thinks she can renounce her love for my husband? That's what I tell you, and now I ask you to leave me alone, because I feel that the effort of this long interview has exhausted my strength and I need more rest.

Cláudius took his leave, kindly, but as soon as he was in the street, he sarcastically monologued: "I've always made a good deal; Nero's pascal won't cheat me out of Drusila's dowry just like that. She won't want it anymore, and you'll see that I'll be asked to marry her... Now, all that's left is for me to find Dafné and instill in her the jealousy for Drusila, so that "little friend" Cáius can have his share".

The fruits of this good seed would not be long in coming.

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One morning, on his way back from a chariot ride with Drusila, who had a passion for this sport, Cáius Lucílius was on his way to his wife's room when a slave girl, all puzzled and weeping, informed him that the lady had sent everyone away on a pretext of rest. Surprised and presuming any illness in his young wife, he simply asked:

- Where is she?

- In the dressing room - answered the slave. He hurriedly walked over, lifted the curtain, but at the first glance, he was surprised! The floor was littered with broken pictures, glass, and precious utensils! Everything was in shambles, and on the sofa, stretched out, Dafné lay disheveled and disheveled, her head buried in the pillows.

Ignoring that his wife had just suffered one of those fits of rage he had never witnessed and could least suspect, he leaned over the couch:

- What is it? what's wrong with you? are you sick?

But he soon backed away, because the girl stood up like a fury with her hands clenched, half-naked, lit pupils re-brightening through the hair falling across her forehead...

Positively hideous!

- Scoundrel, infamous, traitor! While you leave me here, imprisoned, like a vile slave, you're out there showing off your mistresses! What do you think of me? Do you think I'm blind person, and that I'll keep quiet about this martyrdom? Oh, my dear mother, now I see that you were right when you said that I should be despised and mistreated... Mad, mad that I wasn't to believe you. But now I can't stand it any longer: get out, get out of my way, you wretch, I don't want to see you anymore...

At the same moment, she threw a big pot of cream at him, which the boy could barely dodge.

At this unexpected attack, he also lost his temper and in one leap grabbed her by the wrists.

- Idiot, who are you talking about?

His eyes were blazing, and at the same time he constricted her as if he wanted to crush her bones.

- You monster! - she cried - do you want to massacre me after having lied to me so torpidly? To whom am I alluding? To Drusila, your mistress, whom you ride in your car while you leave me abandoned here, so that the whole city will know of my shame. Let me go, you bandit; let me go, I can't do it anymore...

Unable to free herself from the iron hands that constrained her,

she bent down in an abrupt gesture and bit his arm.

The boy gave a cry of pain and, petrified at the blood that flowed from the deep bite, exploded:

- You beast!

Livid, foaming with rage, he grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the ground, while with his right hand he pulled the whip from his belt. She struggled in vain, rolling and howling like a badly wounded lioness, as the licks creased her half-naked torso.

Despite the infernal racket, not a single slave dared to enter the room: only the malicious Etra, who had peeked in through the folds of the curtain, ran to warn Fábia of what was going on. The matron soon appeared, and when she saw her beloved Cáius, mad with rage, whip in hand and Dafné bleeding, she shouted and stood between them.

- Cáius, what is that? - and snatched the whip from him. At the timbre of that voice, the young man was startled. He was as pale and shaky as if he were a dying man. Without a word, he let himself be led to his grandmother's room and there he collapsed on a chair, trembling and sweating profusely.

Drusila, who had been talking to her grandmother when the slave girl came there, withdrew to a corner, and stared at her cousin, both moved and amazed.

- Quickly, daughter - Fábia told her - fetch some wine, water and dressings, and give orders that no one is to enter here.

Quick as a flash of lightning, the girl was soon back, and the two silently healed the bite on the boy, who, motionless, with his eyes still, seemed to see and understand nothing. The old woman finally wiped his forehead, and, all trembling, brought the cup of wine close to his lips:

- Drink, son of the heart, be comforted....

He shuddered and sighed deeply, letting his head hang down on the good lady's breast. The lady, signaling the girl to leave, laid her hands on her grandson's ringed wig, and remained silent for a long time. She knew that after such crises, there was always a natural, sedative reaction. So, she refrained from intervening until the boy's sobs and the tears bubbling up in his eyes confirmed the expected reaction.

Little by little he calmed down, and himself led the venerable patrician to sit in her armchair, sitting, in turn, at her feet to tell her:

- Forgive me for this distressing hour I've given you.... - kissed her snowy hands and rested his forehead on her knees.

The noble matron understood that look, which contained not only

an apology, but a mute confession of her right judgment, when she suspected that this rustic creature, brought up by a lax and criminal woman, and who, not because of her plebeian condition, but because of the environment in which she had grown up, was unworthy to marry him.

- Poor son, lift your brow and don't be discouraged like this. This time you're wrong; you've lost your head to the point of beating your wife, which is unjustified in a man of your class. What will your father say about all this?

- Don't tell him - she pleaded, casting her big, still moist eyes at him. - You would have embarrassed me even more, since he was right to oppose the marriage: Ah, he understood my happiness better than I do. You can't imagine, Grandma, how much I've suffered since the day I got married: this woman is perverse, she doesn't love me at all, and even takes pleasure in making me jealous... Today, I recognize that what she wanted and cherished in me was the patriciate and the fortune. However, you see, I love her sincerely and I've done everything to be pleasing to her. But everything is useless; she perseveres in her naive wickedness and, to add to my despair, she hates you as much as she hates my father.

- This is nothing new to me, son; but once you're married, you must be kind and patient, to put a face on the defective character of this creature who is now your wife. You have no right to repudiate the fact that she is just the way she is, and has never ceased to be, even though you have not had the opportunity to observe and presume. You didn't want to admit that by plucking from the plebeian strata this unfortunate woman, whose mother's only aim was to raise her to our social level, you would have to face situations and accidents that your education could not conceive. This is exactly - remember? - what I feared when I alluded to the difference in social level, which you had, then, merely prejudiced. Married to any soldier or tavern keeper, Dafné would be a bearable wife: one or the other, she wouldn't have half measures to get the clothes to her hair, and they would get along anyway, le and le. But you, my poor son, can't put up with these anomalies with impunity.

But I also tell you: don't despair, she is still a child and maybe she can be corrected. I want to believe that it was her love for you that drove her to such extremes of jealousy, and if one day she comes to understand that her suspicions are unfounded, she will be ashamed of having harbored them.

And now, my son, try to rest, see if you can get some sleep, also because you have to come to our meal and there is no need for the

slaves and servants to think that you're disconsolate because you've punished your wife. Let me settle things in such a way as to spare you irritating and indiscreet questions. I can't and must not keep anything from Semprônius, but I'll do it in such a way that he will never mention anything to you.

Yielding to his grandmother's tender insistence, the boy lay down after taking some soothing drops and soon fell into a deep, but restless sleep.

Fábia kissed his feverish forehead and left.

In the hall she found Semprônius, who was looking for her, in fact, very agitated.

- What's up? Cláudius and Apolônius have just told me vaguely that there has been a fight between Cláudius and Dafné... What are these mysteries?

- Calm down, son - he answered, drawing him out onto the terrace, where he began to give a detailed account of the unfortunate events.

Semprônius, leaning against the balcony, listened attentively to everything, and from time to time cut his speech short with violent exclamations.

- Dafné is greatly to blame - the matron ended up saying - but Cáius also let himself be taken in and put the whip to bleed him, so that now he's sorry, ashamed, so much so that he begged me not to tell you, and I want you to refrain, at least for today, from touching the subject.

With his hands folded behind his back, the patrician began to pace from side to side:

- Despicable creature, worthy daughter of Túlia, what would she not have done to drive my Cáius to such extremes? I had foreseen that this little thing wouldn't make him happy, and I've always opposed the marriage... But, in the end, we are both guilty...

He stopped in front of Fábia, nervously:

- We should consider that whims are the stuff of children, and that a boy of twenty-two can discern nothing in the matter of conjugal convenience. It is therefore the duty of the relatives to prevent such foolishness. Unfortunately, my mother, no one dies of love failures, and I can see that our foolish condescension is going to bring us much misfortune yet.

At the end of the meal, which went on quietly and sadly, Semprônius held out a glass of wine to his son and spoke to him with a significantly comforting look:

- Drink up, son: wine always cheers the soul, and I'm noticing that

you're somewhat melancholy. Look, I'll have the car hitched up and we'll go to Pompeii, where an interesting show is being performed today. Cláudius and Apolônius will go with us, and we will all have fun.

After the two boys had gone away to change their clothes, and only Drusila remained in the room, her eyes downcast until then, sucking on a piece of fruit, Cáius came closer to his father and, with a deep expression of gratitude in his eyes, kissed his father's hand.

- Okay, son, we're clear. - And I'll tap you on the shoulder: - untie that unfriendly face of yours and everything will be all right...

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One beautiful afternoon, on which the warmth of the sun has succeeded a soft, redolent wind, we find Cáius Lucílius on the small terrace where we saw him talking to Cláudius before the wedding, sending a letter and other treats to Dafné. This time our man is alone.

Wine and fruit on the small table beside him remained intact, while a deep wrinkle creased his forehead, while his mobile face reflected anguish of spirit.

She had not seen Dafné for twelve days, who, after her exemplary punishment, had pleaded illness, and had become withdrawn, invisible, and withdrawn to her quarters.

Only once had Fábia tried to visit her, to calm her down and give her some guidance. She returned, however, indignant, and no one dared to tell her the results of the interview. She didn't want anyone to know that she had found Dafné completely outraged, hurling a torrent of insults at her husband in an inconceivable slur that made her blush. The grandmother's silence had a painful reaction on the young patrician, who gradually understood more and more clearly the extent of his folly in marrying that perfidious and ungrateful woman who, in such a short time, was already making his existence bitter. He knew, because she had not hidden it from him, of his hatred for this grandmother, who was worth to his concept as a symbol of virtue and dignity. The venerable lady's clear and deep gaze penetrated and read in the heart of the double-hearted and frivolous woman that Dafné was, her inclinations when, in her husband's absence, she tried to exchange expressive glances with the sculptor as he worked on modeling her bust...

Of course, she didn't confess the secret reasons for her aversion to Fábia, whose vigilance was a constraint to her impulses; but the

truth is that her irascible and violent genius didn't allow her to completely conceal the designs that worked in her soul. Semprônius also disliked him. A brusque and haughty man, he didn't hesitate to let her know that only chance had given him a name in society; and whenever she performed any act that was less decorous, or simply evocative of her humble past, he made her feel, bluntly, that she was now in a patrician manor house and not in a tavern.

Cáius Lucílius suffered cruelly from this hostility of his beloved wife to the two loved ones he cherished most in this world. That harsh, violent, tyrannical father had always been good and tender to him. He loved him, therefore, with all his heart. And as for his grandmother, a gentle and indulgent spirit, revered by all and in whose arms, he had grown up, he held her as a sacred idol and a model of all virtues. This is how, bitterly saddened, he asked himself if, by hating the two beings he most trembled over and revered in the world, Dafné could love him. It's true that she lavished him with the most tender names, sometimes showing an inordinate passion; but he sensed that something extraordinary was intervening, something that whispered to him, from the arcana of his conscience, that once the flame of delirious love was extinguished, once the instinct was satiated, not a trace of affinity could link them in the future.

Then came to his mind the tormenting hours that woman had already given him in these two months of marriage, sometimes demanding exaggerated caresses with insatiable voluptuousness, sometimes torturing him with her brutal jealousy, wanting as it were to search his heart, autopsy his past, lord it over him, in short, even threatening suicide if he didn't renounce his father and grandmother. And as if all this were not enough, she was still scandalized by any kindness, a simple smile directed at another woman!

It was incredible the versatility of her genius, which suddenly went from the warmest outbursts to the coldest indifference; which sifted her with suspicions and accusations; which tried to arouse jealousy in him and even demanded that he leave his father's house (judged to be petty) to settle down lavishly in Rome. That unrelenting fight, with alternatives of ardor and coldness, exceeded the strength of the young athlete, who was visibly wasting away and, from being communicative and jovial, had become reserved and irritable.

That prolonged nervous contention had finally exploded, on the memorable morning that had led him, mad with rage, to unload his bow on the viper that had broken his arm after poisoning his heart.

At that moment, all these thoughts were stirring in the ulcerated heart of Cáius, pulling a painful sigh from his chest.

Despite everything, that violent but generous soul had devoted himself to Dafné. Yes, he loved her despite her wickedness, and that's why he didn't stop suffering with that prolonged estrangement. But he didn't want to be the first to look for her, lest he show regret or weakness.

Suddenly, a curtain was opened and Dafné appeared! She paused for a moment, as if undecided. She wore with intentional simplicity a white wool dress, fastened at the waist by a gold cord, and she had a flower of a pomegranate tree attached to her thinning blond hair.

Mute, she gazed with half-reproachful, half-in love eyes at the handsome boy absorbed in her cogitations; and then, sliding like a shadow towards him, she knelt down and took his hands:

- Cáius, my love, forgive me.... - She murmured in a mellifluous voice, already choked with tears.

He shuddered, raised his head, but, meeting the moist, pleading eyes of the genuflected woman, he felt all anger fade and, drawing her to his chest without articulating a word, he pressed her lips together in a long, tender kiss.

- Oh! how happy I think I'm! I thought I would die if your absence lasted any longer - she repeated, wrapping her arms, like two white serpents, around her husband's neck, embracing him with effusion.

And yet, as these loving words swirled from her lips, others flowed into her truculent heart, saying to herself: - Leave you alone, my executioner, you'll still pay for the whipping and the humiliation of this moment as soon as I get rid of Fábia and Semprônius.

- Dafné, my dear, may this hour of reconciliation make us forget all past setbacks. Try to trust me and don't let yourself be blinded by unfounded jealousy. Then we will be happy.

It was the word of forgiveness generous, loyal, frank, like the soul that spoke it.

There were no mental restrictions, no possible conditions. Fábia's words were still ringing in his ears: "Only with patience and kindness should I correct and ennoble that imperfect and unhappy creature.

Poor Cáius, he could hardly suspect that all that pretended repentance was the work of Túlia. But just the day before, when she felt most anguished and angry, a sudden idea came to her: she wrapped

up some trivial objects, wrapped herself in a dark cloak, and left the house, after advising Etra to keep watch so that no one would notice her absence.

Without wasting a minute, she went to her mother's store, knocking on the already closed door. When she recognized her, Túlia flinched in surprise, but didn't repel her, but rather tried to listen to her statement, which was made with tears of revolt and fits of anger.

We dare not inquire whether it was maternal love or passion for Drúsus that acted on Túlia's mood. The fact is that she was reconciled with her daughter, accepted her presents, and after a thorough investigation of Semprônius' guests, made her feel positively that she must be reconciled, and even hinted to her how she should present herself in order to endear her husband, who, in her opinion, was being worked by her grandmother and her father to separate him from her as much as possible. It was also not difficult for her to persuade Dafné that winning her husband's heart was worth the defeat of her two supposed enemies.

Therefore, we said that the young patrician could hardly suspect that his wife's apparent repentance was the work of Túlia.

XIV
Nero's departure

While these events were being dishonored at Semprônius' home, Nero was gradually recovering under the loving care of the couple, Márcus Fábius, who treated him as if he were a very close relative.

However, it must be said that if his physical healing progressed to the point where he was already worried about returning to his father's house, his morale had worsened.

Those insidious revelations from Cláudius had made the most vivid and at the same time painful impression on him - a new source of jealousy and spite, opening in his already ulcerated soul. He often recalled the anguish of his father and grandmother at the imminent danger that threatened the death of the beloved Cáius, while his disastrous fall, followed by a very serious injury, had neither moved nor impressed anyone, and the care lavished on him by strangers was even taken for granted.

He had a growing animosity in his rancorous spirit, his heart overflowing with gall for that younger brother, celebrated and loved by all, including that Drusila whom he had imagined he was marrying, believing he was loved.

This persuasion had produced in him, cold and unveiled soul, the effect of a cooling balm. For what? - Could there possibly be, in the world, an entity capable of loving him and preferring him alone, exclusively?

The perfidious revelation of the musician had shattered this beneficial illusion, and at the same time had killed all his vanity and self-love. Drusila would marry him, yes, but with the sole intention of stifling the passion that Cáius had inspired in her... He recognized himself as less handsome, less intelligent, less wealthy than his brother, but he didn't see this as a reason for the favorite of the gods to beat him in everything, even in the affections to which he had an indisputable right. Drusila's preference seemed to him a degrading outrage, throbbing in his soul. And what poisoned his fraternal hatred the most was, however, the bond of reciprocal affection that he had discovered between Cáius and Virgília.

Never had anyone impressed him as much as this small creature with childlike features and golden hair, whose crystalline laughter and gracious gestures and manner always comforted his blushing heart. More than once she was surprised to think: "what a shame to be married...".

And yet, what a singular thing, Márcus Fábius didn't make her

jealous!

The ever-uniform friendship of that man, as good as he was beautiful, disarmed him, and he even doubted that such a phlegmatic and thoughtful temperament could entirely satisfy the gregarious and trembling Virgília.

Then, Cáius Lucílius, who laughed with her and like her, who embraced her without ceremony and dipped his burning gaze into those blue eyes, seemed to him a suspicious and dangerous element. When they were together, they joked and improvised things that made the peaceful Fábius laugh out loud.

Oh! - said Cáius once, "these hours lived here are the best of my life..." and despite her husband's presence, Virgília leaned toward the boy and, stroking a ring of his black hair between her fingers, said, all moved: - "I notice that you're pale and sad sometimes... what's wrong with you, my Cáius? He didn't answer but took her little hands and kissed them tenderly. And soon Márcus Fábius was warning with that melodious, clear voice, as if oblivious to such reciprocal expansions: "it is all the more reason for us to give you double of our friendship and joy." It is true that Cáius and Virgília had grown up together, and this justified the greatest intimacy between them; but despite everything, in Nero's eyes, Márcus Fábius embodied the most bronco of husbands, because, blind to the evidence of a culpable love between the two young men. And even though he himself, Nero, was becoming more and more entangled in his passion for Virgília, he didn't think he was exempt from opening his husband's eyes, but he just didn't know how to do it, because he lacked complete proof.

In his obsession with this cult, which led him to look for opportunities to contemplate his idol, even from afar, he was in the garden one day when he noticed the girl, who, returning from her usual walk with her little boy and his nanny, sat under a trellis and, taking the child in her arms, amused herself by making him bounce on her knees.

He, in turn, sat on a bench hidden by a clump of trees, and, bending his gaze through the foliage, seemed to want to magnetize the carefree Virgília, who could hardly suspect his presence there.

What a beautiful picture of that apparently childish mother, radiant with joy, playing with the little child who was screaming and trying to grab her golden hair!

The appearance of Cáius Lucílius interrupted the scene. He came up eagerly, took the child in his arms, kissed him, and handed him over to the servant girl.

- Fábius? - he asked, settling down next to her.

- He told me that he had business at the Forum, but it shouldn't be long around either.

She ordered the nanny to leave.

And as soon as they were alone, she took the boy's hand and said in an affectionate tone: - "always downcast and sad, you don't even seem the same to me anymore... Tell me: what is it that upsets you so? Am I not, perhaps, your childhood friend? We love you sincerely and it pains us to see you suffer like this... "It seems to me that I can guess the cause of all this; but the truth is, I don't have the heart to tell you, because I'm afraid of hurting you..."

He sketched a melancholy smile and, leaning toward the young woman, put his ear to her. With his neck stretched out and his lips pursed, Nero tried to grasp what he thought was a loving confidence from his brother. In vain! All he could perceive was that it was a serious matter, because Cáius turned pale and blushed successively, with abundant and lively gestures.

Virgília, on the other hand, mirrored the most vivid emotions in her face and her moist eyes revealed intense curiosity. Sometimes she brought her hand to her interlocutor's forehead, and then, in an affectionate impulse, she laid her head on his shoulder.

Nero barely contained himself in his hiding place. He didn't know where he was that he wouldn't explode right there, out of anger and jealousy.

But, no! He considered that he had, after all, good weapons against Virgília.

In all conscience, she could tell her husband that in his absence his wife received her lover, cried with him, and exchanged confidences and caresses.

Márcus Fábius, in spite of all his honesty and goodness, could not bear such an affront, and would snatch away her best hopes...

At that moment, the virtuous Virgília, who could scarcely have guessed the terrible trap that was being set for her domestic peace, heard the whirring of Márcus' carriage, which had just stopped at the entrance gate.

She got up quietly, wiped away a few tears that still pearled her rosy cheeks, and waving an intimate farewell, ran inside to meet her husband.

Nero also sneaked out and tried to enter the house, trying hard to control the emotion that was stirring him. At the bend of a alley, he bumped into his brother who, having separated from Virgília, had decided to take a walk in the garden.

- Good morning, Nero! - And then, standing up - You're in a good

mood today! It's clear that you're, thanks to our gods, completely recovered.... But then, why don't you go back to the house? Dad has often asked for you...

- Really? Well, I'm very surprised by this favor, to think that I'm still alive...

And then, in a sarcastic tone:

- But, if you miss me so much, why did you visit me only twice, the last time three weeks ago?

- Because he has been very preoccupied with his business, because you don't know that he has just bought a large wine estate near Salerno. For this reason, he has traveled twice, and even these last few days he had to receive our intendants, as well as the one in Capua, where you were raised, and which suffered a great fire and serious damage. But that's the least of it. What I want - he said, taking his arm and staring at him with piercing eyes - is to ask you a very serious question: - I want you to explain the reason for your dislike of me and our father. I'm sorry, but I can't describe in any other way the feeling that inspires your harsh words and the acrimony with which you treat me. My conscience doesn't accuse me of deserving this treatment, even because I welcomed you fraternally, with an open heart and open arms. And as for our father, I must not hide, I who love him so much, the disgust that your attitude and your concepts cause me. So, tell me honestly, do you have any offense against him?

Nero leaned against a plane tree and crossed his arms. All the bad feelings he had repressed in his heart emerged at that instant to burst out, like burning lavas, with the sole purpose of embittering the heart of that privileged and fortunate brother, who still had the audacity to ask him for an account of his hatred.

He then decided to scourge all those whom the other shuddered at, to paint that father who mistreated him as if he were a brutal tyrant; a father and a neglected husband; And finally, Fábia, selfish and ambitious, abandoning three poor imbibe children, to lure him into the comfortable and advantageous position of absolute mistress of Semprônius' manor.

- Your question proves that you don't know everything - he answered with a sullen voice and a vulpine gaze - because listen: this indulgent father that you shudder so much has only been indulgent with you... Otherwise, look: - He married a good woman, as beautiful as she was, but whom he hated and from whom, nevertheless, there were three children whom he also came to hate, only because another very dear lover demanded it. Finally, my mother died in her prime... How? from what? Nobody knows; but perhaps it was from

the evil that victimizes those who become undesirable. But whatever the case, the fact remains that, three months later, Dad was marrying the woman who had been the ideal of his youth and had patiently waited for the annihilation of his rival. And the result is that we were rejected without pity or mercy, because that sweet and gentle creature would rather step on an adder than face the children of the first marriage. And this exemplary father, this exemplary indulgence, banished us to a place where he never set foot! Antony was then 8 years old, Semprônia 6 and I 4; at first Fábia kept us company, but your mother's illness required a governess and Fábia hurried back. We were left to the care of an old relative, who, as stupid as she was wicked, took care of everything but us. We were even beaten up by her own slaves who were sure of impunity. Lívia died, you became the exclusive treasure of the family; her wishes were religiously fulfilled, since you owe everyone nothing but gratitude for the pampering you've received from everyone. Fábia remained at your side, preferring, as was to be expected, to govern the house of Semprônius than to live in an isolated estate, to support the miserable and innocent reprobates. So, we grew up forgotten, dismembered from the family, and so well taken care of that my poor sister eventually escaped in the company of a former slave, who was a good man. Meanwhile, this loving father, this indulgent father had not a word for his runaway daughter - I won't say of pity - but of anger and cursing, and he simply crossed her name off the family board! And that's when he transferred us to Rome, handed over to Drúsus, with this recommendation: "whatever depends on my purse to secure them an independent position, is at your disposal, without restriction..." It didn't occur to him that children need something more than a handful of gold, given with contempt. The rest, you know him to assess the circumstances in which you see me, here, in the land of my birthplace, after twenty-four years.

As he spoke, the other man became livid, his forehead streaked with cold sweat. Mute, without a twitch of his face, without a gesture of impatience, Cáius Lucílius listened to the tremendous libel he was being hurled at those he held dear in his life.

When Nero fell silent, he crossed his arms and stared at him with stern, flashing eyes:

- It was good that I heard from your mouth the outrages you've suffered, but let me also tell you that, as deeply offended as you're, you should never have crossed the threshold of our father's house, wiping our father's name forever from our memory and lips: but since you're here, since you embraced him and laid your head on our

grandmother's lap, since you kissed his hands, you're the last of the cowards when you try to demean them to lower them in my estimation. You accuse father of murder, but why, your hypocritical slanderer, do you not tell him face to face? Because, as you well know, he would answer you with the truth, that is, that your mother died a natural death, because nobody waits nine years to get rid of an undesirable creature. However, let it be said: if this supposed victim was a viper of your caliber, of course she could not even be loved. For my part, I remain faithful to the memory of my mother, and I continue to love, as before, our father and grandmother, willing to defend them from everything and everyone.

And to you I say: if anyone in all this is to blame, the biggest culprit is me, to whom they so much tremble... You can hate me, but... look here: if one day you dare to slander these two dear ones, who can no longer defend themselves, it is me ' have to face, even if blood has to flow between us.

He turned his back on her and left through a door that led to the courtyard, where the litter awaited him.

Nero remained for a moment indecisive, astonished...

That same day, in the afternoon, he told Fábius of his intention to return the next day to his father's home.

- I've long abused your hospitality - he said - and since I intend to leave Herculaneum within the next fortnight, convenience dictates that I do so.

- Your presence has only given us pleasure, although we would have preferred it for another reason; but why are you in such a hurry to leave us? Your leave, I suppose, still allows six weeks off!

- I'm sorry to have to leave you, but I hope to see you again in Rome when you go there, as you project. In Semprônius' house, I'll always be superfluous, and I don't think anyone will notice my absence. And now I regret having come, even more since the plan to marry Drusila has been aborted. I prefer to remain single, but, you understand, this refusal has not failed to create a left-wing position for me within the family. To get rid of all this unpleasantness, I decided to take advantage of an excellent opportunity to return to Rome.

- I fully understand your scruples and setbacks, but what opportunity do you want to talk about?

- Because I've heard that the Quaestor Hatérius Rúfus is in Pompeii visiting his daughter and intends to return to Rome, by sea. I know the Quaestor very well, whose second son is my colleague and commands a cohort of the legion to which I belong. Since I also

prefer the journey by sea, I tried to ask Hatérius for a place in his galley and I've just received a very kind answer, for he not only accedes to my request but invites all the family, as well as Agripa and yourself, to spend the day at his daughter's house and honor her boot-out.

Moreover, he reserved the right to come in person, a few days in advance, to ratify the invitation and to outline the program of the party.

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The next day, Nero returned to penates, more misanthropic, more taciturn than ever, isolating himself as much as possible from everything and everyone.

Cáius Lucílius, for his part, also avoided him, keeping a cold secret.

Some days went by like this, until one morning they met alone, in the summer triclinium, at lunchtime. Semprônius was absent, and Cláudius and Apolônius had remained in Stabile since the day before.

They had a quiet lunch, and only after the slaves had left done the officer turn to his brother and say to him with a barely disguised smile:

- Rejoice, my dear, for in twelve days you'll be free from my presence.

Cáius Lucílius, who now was holding a glass of wine to his lips, set it down on the table and replied, facing him firmly:

- I think it's the best thing you can do, running away from a hateful and criminal kindred such as ours. And unless it would be an impossible reconciliation for me, with a father accused of uxoricide, separation is the most logical and natural thing to do.

Nero walked away shrugging his shoulders, but after a few steps, he changed his mind, came back to the table, and said:

- I was forgetting to tell you that I leave free of commitments to Drusila, for I don't wish to kidnap any of the priests and priestesses who officiate here to the "domestic god of Semprônius"...

Cáius stood up quickly and, grabbing his arm, murmured red, staring at him with a fiery look:

- For I'll tell you the real reason for your desistance: - it is that you yourself have erected an altar on which you deposit the most ardent vows to your divinity.... Priest of Virgília, be convinced, however, and take care or rather - be disillusioned, because the wife of Fábius will never love any man other than her husband.

Nero recoiled as if wounded in the middle of his chest. His face

was covered successively with a bronzed red and an emaciated livor. He hadn't expected such a shock.

Cáius stared at him from top to bottom, scornfully, and continued:

- As you see, your generosity doesn't deceive me: it isn't with the intention of reserving unanimity of affections for me that you stop marrying Drusila, but because of your foolish passion for Virgília. You got burned by the wings of the "golden butterfly," but you believed me blind and wanted to hide your feelings.

He turned his back on her and left.

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Eight days after this friction, Metela and Virgília were on the terrace connected to the latter's room. They were talking about the officer's upcoming departure.

- For your sake, I rejoice in this fact - Metela finally said - but I must confess that, despite the sympathy he aroused in me at first, he's now beginning to inspire in me the deepest aversion. He avoids everybody, isolates himself from his brother, who also seems elusive to me, gives his words a mordant tone whenever he refers to his father, spreads, in short, a whole ring of burning hatred. But worst of all is the strange look with which he watches you and follows your smallest gestures. I even think that he's capable of any kind of madness.

- It's true: - I also notice the unusual expression in his eyes, whenever we face each other, as well as the sudden pallor when he sees me hugging Fábius. His departure is a relief for everyone. But since all this will be back on track as soon as he's gone, let's forget about him right now and talk about more pleasant things, namely the party at Hatérius Rúfus' house. Parties like that, I wish I had them in bard. Check it out: - First, morning drive around town; next, performance at the amphitheater; then, farewell dinner and evening party aboard the galley. Finally, as an apotheosis, Nero's departure!

And he laughed heartily, rubbing his hands together.

- So, Metela, not even this kick-ass show makes you laugh? Is it really "Neronian" terror that makes you so macabre?

- It's not only that - replied Metela, whose beautiful face reflected, at that moment, real uneasiness - it's that the other day I had a terrifying dream: I saw Vesuvius spewing flames that rose up into the clouds and then I saw the city disappear into a sea of fire...

I was I don't know whereas an impotent spectator, terrified, contemplating the cataclysm? The delirious mob was engulfed, merged,

disappeared into the rubble of the city and, although confused, I remember seeing Drúsus, Dafné and several other friends of ours during this mob... The impression of the dream was so strong that I awoke with a scream and trembling, as if delirious with fever... Agripa got up startled and tried to give me a tranquilizer.

However, I later learned from the slave women that an old sibyl, who lives in the same block, had predicted great misfortune for our city, so much so that many more cautious families are leaving. I asked Agripa to attend to me, that we should go too, but, strong in spirit, he laughed in my cheeks and ended up saying that it was a shame to flee from Herculaneum carried away by the foolishness of an old fool, or by a simple dream with which the gods wanted, perhaps, to test my courage.

Virgília, who had been pleasant, had also become apprehensive.

- You're right - she said - we have to leave Herculaneum and convince our husbands that they too have to give in something for the sake of our tranquility.

But before the party, of course, we won't achieve anything. Let Nero go, therefore, once and for all, and then they'll attend to us...

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After all, the big day arrived. Early in the morning, everyone was already active in Semprônius ' house. Each one on his or her own side, better prepared to enjoy the party of Hatérius Rúfus, after the spectacle in the amphitheater. It was a great party, which the people were eagerly awaiting.

Cáius Lucílius was in a good mood, although Dafné refused, since she had been ill since the day before, and preferred to stay at home. It was true that his wife didn't deserve his absolute trust, but the presence of Fábia, who was also staying to keep Drúsus company, was likely to reassure him.

Back in his room, Nero, always taciturn and apprehensive, was putting the finishing touches to his clothes. His luggage had been sent the day before to board the Quaestor's galley.

However, before leaving, perhaps forever, the house that had seen him born, he wanted to pay one last visit to Márcus Fábius, also because, he presumed, at that early hour, he would find him alone.

Overwhelmed and agitated by a thousand thoughts of jealousy and bitterness, he took his helmet, went out and reclined on his litter.

Márcus Fábius was already dressed for the party; he strolled into the courtyard and gave the tribune the usual warm welcome.

- Dear Márcus - said the official, as he shook his hand - I would like to speak to you privately, for a confidence that I would like to delegate to someone else, if possible, and I've been procrastinating hour after hour... However, a duty of gratitude compels me to open your eyes in time for you to be able to conjure up the misfortune that threatens you...

Walking, they came to a secluded room. Márcus offered her a chair and, seating himself, spoke in turn, somewhat surprised:

- What do you mean by such a sibylline exordium?

I beg you not to bother me with veiled abuses, but to tell me frankly and openly what you know or think you know.

- In this case, I must also ask you to be calm and not to be hasty in predicting that your marital fortune is in jeopardy if you don't put an end to a few interviews between your wife and my brother, for they love each other in secret and you, of course, could never suspect such a thing.

Fábius' beautiful and noble face radiated the most absolute disbelief:

- Nero, my friend, you allow yourself to be deluded by false appearances: Virgília loves me sincerely, deeply, with all her heart, and if she preferred me to Cáius, how could she deceive me now with the same Cáius?

- It seems impossible, perhaps it is unacceptable, but the point is that I've proof of what I'm saying. The passion of Cáius for your wife has never been extinguished, and the fascination he exerts over women is well known to all. The day before I left this house, you were absent and I saw them with these eyes, sitting under the trellis in the garden, in a more than suspicious colloquy and attitude. She seemed to inquire earnestly; he answered with a vehemence that denoted something more than friendship.

Márcus Fábius smiled serenely:

- I know everything: - this interview took place with my authorization, or rather, I was the one who started it, because I saw that Cáius was sad and upset, and I asked Virgília to try to console him.

- But did you also ask her to weep with him, to lean on his shoulder, to hold him in her arms, and only to tear herself from his arms when she heard your car stop at the door? - Nero insisted lyingly, already spiteful and driven by the desire to stir up jealousy.

And such was the firmness, such was the conviction with which he spoke, that Márcus Fábius didn't fail to turn slightly pale.

- Moreover - continued Nero - to dispel your last scruples, I'm going to tell you a secret, even though I was sworn to keep it: - It's that someone, whose name I can't give, heard it from Dafné herself, who, on the day of the unfortunate disaster, saw the car passing by and Cáius was so absorbed in the warmth of his companion that he didn't even notice her presence.

Out of jealousy, she cut across the road and finally saw them kissing as they crossed a more deserted stretch of road. And that's when she lost her mind and, using her handkerchief, scared the pair away.

Márcus Fábius raised his already wrinkled brow and in a faltering voice murmured:

- I thank you for the revelation.

- Poor friend, I know how sorry you're: but tell me, what do you intend to do with the peasant?

- I don't know: I'm going to observe for myself and decide, in all conscience, how I should proceed. For now, what I need is to coordinate ideas, and you'll forgive my absence, until we meet later, at the amphitheater.

The sycophant waited no longer, got back on his litter, and left. Perfidious and worried by jealousy, he rejoiced inwardly at having sown suspicion and dissension, tending not only to separate Cáius from Virgília, but also to cool the relations of the couple, until then a happy couple.

He was avenged in his self-love and fraternal hatred.

XV

Herculaneum's last moments

At Semprônius' house, while the cars were hitched up, the whole family gathered for the farewell lunch.

Only Cáius was slow in coming. He stayed close to Dafné, who, because of her alleged illness, remained in bed and tried to give her husband the most tender goodbyes.

- My darling, light of my eyes - she repeated, holding him by the neck and trying to hold him - don't forget your Dafné when the others there stare at you in wonder... oh, sometimes I wish you were less seductive, my Cáius...

- I can't share this wish - he replied, as he tried to extricate himself. And laughing - but don't sulk, calm down, so that tomorrow morning I'll come and find you happy and in a good mood.

When the meal was over, Nero, who seemed saddened, tenderly said goodbye to his grandmother and uncle, and the retinue soon moved on.

Drusila was in Semprônius' carriage, Cláudius accompanied Nero, and behind followed Cáius and Rutuba, who was to guard the equipment during the function at the amphitheater.

The retinue was already at a good distance from the city, and the car of Cáius had a great lead, when Rutuba, leaning toward the young patrician, tapped him lightly on the shoulder and said:

- Boss, I must tell you of an abominable treachery, to be consummated now in your house and in your absence. It's no wonder that the sculptor pleaded urgency of work and that your wife reported sick... They have an appointment, and I know this because I know Dafné much better than you can imagine. If you want to go back right now, I'm sure you'll catch them red-handed...

Cáius shuddered, his face flushed red with sealing. He bumped into the horses and quickly turned the car around.

Perceiving the maneuver, Semprônius shouted:

- What is this?

- I'm going back for a forgotten object, and I'll be back in time to meet us in the amphitheater, because you know I can run, and I like to do it.

The old patrician nodded, and the boy hurried away, while turning around and saying to Rutuba in a deaf voice:

- Tell me: how did you meet Dafné, and how did you surprise her with falseness?

- Forgive me, master, for the silence I've kept on this subject until

now. The fear of your anger sealed my lips, but I should also show gratitude for the benefits you've given me, and so I've never stopped watching over your honor. I met Túlia in Rome, when she was running a tavern in partnership with a former companion of her husband. Dafné pleased me and we became engaged, but I lacked the resources to begin life. After two years of engagement, an uncle died, leaving me the legacy of a farm and a cornfield. I went away to take possession of the inheritance, and when I returned ready to marry, mother and daughter had disappeared without a trace. For a long time, I looked for them in vain, until one day a soldier friend, a regular at the tavern, told me that, while in Herculaneum in garrison, he had found the fugitives here, to my great surprise, established with a perfumery.

I came here and heard that Dafné loved you and was almost your fiancée. What to do? I gave up. How could I, a poor, obscure commoner, rival a rich and powerful patrician? Then, when I met you, I was immediately convinced of Dafné's passion. I justified it, yes, but I didn't give up my hatred and I tried to stay around here, to keep an eye on her. I had been looking for a job when one day, sitting at the door of a tavern, I saw a woman pass by all wrapped up in a dark cloak and looking like she was trying to hide. I followed her and saw that she was huddled in a corner. From her gait and manner, I thought I recognized Dafné, and I stopped to watch her, until she stood up and threw her handkerchief in front of the horses. The noble Virgília was a stranger to me, but I knew you very well, and I had no trouble understanding Dafné's behavior. The rest, you know how it was. Of course, I could have opened your eyes right away, but I didn't know that you loved this woman, and, on the other hand, I didn't know you as I do now. Later, having become better acquainted with Dafné's impulsive and sensual temperament, I tried to spy on her, so that she would not betray my benefactor.

Cáius Lucílius was white, the color of his own toga, and his hands were crisp, barely holding the reins.

- You bitch! Your last hour has come. - he said almost imperceptibly. - Take the reins, Rutuba, the heat is stifling, my head is spinning...

- Boss, we'd better leave the car at the city gates and quietly enter the garden, so that no one is worried about our return...

Cáius Lucílius nodded his approval, and when they reached the city gates, there they left the car with the administrator of an inn.

Trying to hide his face in the folds of his toga, the young patrician followed, accompanied by Rutuba, along a path away from the

paternal manor.

All the hellish tortures bubbled up in his soul; he seemed to have a mountain of bronze on his chest that he would never reach.

Finally, they stopped in front of the little gate that led to a secluded alley, just outside the garden wall.

Rutuba took a key from his pocket, opened the gate, and they entered. Then they walked through the deserted garden in the shadows. When he caught sight of Dafné's terrace, the boy stopped for a moment, took from his waistband a Syrian dagger with a recurved blade - a weapon he never abandoned - and carefully examined its sharp point. "It won't miss," - he muttered between his teeth. However, as he approached the window, all adorned with vines that shaded and refreshed the bridal chamber, he could not help compressing his chest with his hands, leaning against the wall, hesitating.

Rutuba was undoing the weft of the closed branches and cautiously probing the interior of the dwelling.

Suddenly, a wry smile broke out on his lips:

- Look - he said in the patrician's ear - convince yourself of the truth...

He stood up on tiptoe, trembling, and cast a fiery glance at the well-known alcove. What he had seen was such as to break all ties that still bound him to the unworthy woman. He was petrified for an instant, but then, resolute, and swift, with the dexterity of a wild feline, he climbed through the window and, before the traitors could notice him, he fell on the sculptor and buried the dagger in his back up to the hilt.

Apolônius gave a scream, opened his arms, rolled to the ground bathed in blood.

Rutuba, who had followed his master, also knife in hand, intending to back him up, if necessary, stopped for a minute and stared at Dafné sarcastically, while she stared at her husband in terror.

Cáius' face had taken on an indefinable expression: flames were sparking from his eyes that seemed to want to reduce the young woman's body to ashes; his teeth, flashing through purplish lips, were shining, and laughing to give her a facet of unheard-of ferocity.

- Forgive me! - cried the perfidious creature, throwing herself at his feet, grabbing his legs, wringing her hands.

He gave her a violent jolt that made her roll on the ground... Then, he grabbed her by the hair, dragged her to the window...

- To the beasts! Infamous, I'll throw you to the beasts...

Rutuba helped her up, and at the same time covered her mouth so she wouldn't make a fuss. In the twinkling of an eye, they were in the

deserted garden and, sometimes carried, sometimes dragged, they reached the courtyard that served as an arena and from where, spaced apart, deafening roars came to them.

They opened the door, the condemned woman gave an anguished cry, the cry of the dying man, and still tried to resist. Like so many other creatures, she didn't fear sin, vice, betrayal; but she feared death, sensing in it the end of impunity.

With her face congested, and her gaze still, the young man cut off her hands that clung to her tunic and, knocking her down, dragged her by the hair to the cages.

Mad with dread and despair, she writhed at his feet, begging for mercy.

The roar of the shivering beasts, which made the cages tremble, as if awakening Cáius from his delirium.

- Mercy? - he repelled her with the tip of his foot, in a wild smile. - Pardon for you? miserable creature that I pulled out of the mud to marry legitimately; viper that bit me, that exploited me and even tried to murder me! False, your love and your caresses! Here, however, you can't lie, you can't deceive! I've seen, I've seen with my own eyes the stigma of my honor, which you can only wash away with death. Die, then, abominable creature, so that no one else may suffer from your venom... No! never! for you there is, there can be neither mercy nor forgiveness!

He shut up, he leaned against the wall, he felt dizzy and suddenly weak, his legs were trembling.

Dafné kept rolling on the slab, now begging Rutuba to save her.

Just then, a muffled rumble was heard, like underground thunder. The earth shivered, and a sudden twilight enveloped and blotted out the sunlight!

Cáius stood up, trembling too.

- Come on, boss - said Rutuba - it's an earthquake... Let's leave her to the tigers, that's what she deserves.

He opened the cages and threw Dafné, who was trying to hold on to him, to the other side of the courtyard.

Then, pulling Cáius, he bolted the door, and they rushed home.

Even then, cries of anguish were heard from all sides.

The people rushed in waves through the streets, shouting - Vesuvius! Fire!

On the terrace, from where the flaming mountain could be seen, Cáius stood fascinated by the terrifying beauty of the panorama!

A gigantic pyramid of smoke rose from the top of the mountain, sometimes whitish, sometimes black, streaked with lightning and

streamers of fire!

High above the clouds, this thick mass spread out in an immense juncture, as if encompassing and overshadowing the whole earth. The ground continued to rumble, shaking the mountain and the fragile human constructions, which swayed on their foundations.

A shout behind him pulled him out of that static contemplation.

- You here?! but... how? - You haven't been to Pompeii?

It was Fábia who, pale, terrified, had just appeared on the terrace.

- Runaway, run away as soon as possible, my son! The city is doomed... it is Metela's dream come true, the angry gods will destroy, bury everything!

- Hurry, boss, there's no time to lose: I've ordered the saddling of Dafné, Hurricane and two more of the best horses. If we leave immediately by the road to Rome, maybe we can still escape the scourge.

- Come on, Granny - said Cáius, dragging her inside.

Fábia, however, let go of his hands:

- Let me stay, my son, for I could only serve you as a hindrance, I could barely stand in your warm corsets. My age is priceless, and I beg you, save Drúsus, the poor blind man, instead. The gods will know how to spare me, if it pleases them. Go, go with my blessing...

- Not without you, never! So, you think me capable of abandoning, cowardly, exposed to a horrible death, the one who raised and nurtured me in her arms? Look, wait a moment, I'll get Uncle...

Like a deer, he walked through the entire house without finding Drúsus. The multiple emotions of that festive and fateful morning made him forget that it was exactly the time that the blind man used to take his bath. New and stronger tremors shook the house, displacing furniture and knocking down statues...

- Come on, boss, otherwise we will be lost... It was Rutuba who, already in the atrium, spoke as she did so. Cáius advanced towards his grandmother and, taking her in his Herculean arms, led her into the courtyard, despite her protests, so as not to hinder the enterprise.

Without wasting a minute, he rode "Hurricane," who, ears perked and tail in the wind, was snorting impatiently. He put Fábia in front of him and, accompanied by Rutuba and two other slaves, they set off.

Outside, another difficulty awaited them: the narrow streets were jammed with cars, pedestrians, and horsemen, who bumped into each other and pressed together in a disorderly flee, trying to gain the port and escape by sea.

It was almost at a pace that they managed to get through the mass, in a blatantly frightening tumult. However, after all the pandemonium had been subdued, the volcano was thundering and, from

its blackened summit, it continued to spew out a whirlwind of flames and smoke.

Uninterrupted detonations, a sulfurous, unbreathable atmosphere was already being felt, while a very tenuous, steaming ash began to spread, blinding men and animals.

When, after great pains, they reached a city gate, the venerable patrician lay lifeless in her grandson's arms.

There was no stopping to give her any help, either.

For the last time, Cáius Lucílius turned and looked tearfully at the city of his birth, already shrouded in a brownish veil. He loosened the reins, and the fiery steeds took off, staggering, devouring the space in a mad dash.

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As this small entourage moved away from the accursed city, riot and disorder broke out in the streets.

The fleeing inhabitants, many of them didn't even look back in their eagerness to save their wives and children; others still tried to save part of their treasures and swept through the mob laden with bags, purses, and precious dishes.

Among this terrified crowd, a woman wrapped in a black cloak was trying to open a passage towards Semprônius' house...

Sometimes she stopped, sometimes she tried to protect herself from the burning rocks that began to rain; panting, distressed, she tried to hear the subterranean noises better, through the rumblings of the crater, which, like a huge boiling caldron, spewed its fizzy slag into the sky.

It was Túlia... Ever since she had reconciled with her daughter, she had never stopped finding out what was going on in Semprônius' house. She didn't know that Cáius, her father, and other members of the family were supposed to be in Pompeii, and that only her daughter, Drúsus and Fábia remained at home.

When the first earthquake struck, she was in a distant block, at the home of a supplier of her trade. Driven by a feeling that oscillated between maternal love and an old passion for Drúsus, the thought occurred to her to save her daughter and to know the fate of the blind man.

In Semprônius' house, there was also great confusion, aggravated by the absence of their leader.

With great difficulty, the old butler organized a salvation service: some mules were loaded with the most precious objects, brought along by mule, and some slaves, under the eyes of the steward, tried to gain the port. Other servants, as if the cataclysm had stripped them of all discipline, had scattered, only looking out for their own salvation, and carrying what came into their hands.

When Drúsus left the bathroom, he wandered half-naked through the deserted and devastated compartments. At first, in their quest for salvation, no one had paid any attention to him; then they had forgotten all about the poor blind man, who listened to the unusual noise of the elements and the clamor of the people trying in vain to find his way and find someone to lead him out of the house.

She called in vain, but no one answered her!

Túlia, who had just rushed through the atrium on her way to her daughter's room, almost bumped into the blind man who, arms open, was walking in the direction of the footsteps she had heard. Faced with what she saw, she stared in astonishment, anxiously contemplating that pale and anguished face for a moment.

Her heart was beating violently; she forgot her daughter and a single thought overwhelmed her brain - to save the man who had been, who was still her only passion in life.

- Drúsus! - he exclaimed, holding her arm - come with me, I'll take you out of the city...

- Who are you? Where do you come from?

- I'll tell you later: what matters now is to escape, the city is doomed to disappear, Vesuvius never stops spewing fire and lava.

Thus speaking, she dragged the blind man to the door, but once outside, risking her first steps, she immediately retreated in terror, because a kind of burning paste was already hitting her face. They took shelter in the peristyle. Day had turned into night, torrents of water and ashes flooded the streets, and the breath of a furnace made the air unbreathable.

- It's impossible to go out - she murmured, leading him back inside and getting him a chair.

- I can't go on, I'm short of air...

Trembling, beside herself, she knelt in front of him and held his face in the folds of her cloak.

- Drúsus, my Drúsus, it was the hand of the gods that brought me to your feet! Criminal yes but suffering always. Disdained, forgotten, I could never forget you, I never stopped loving you.

- But who are you that speaks to me like this? I know your voice, but I don't know, I can't remember your name...

I groped her hair, in anxiety...

- Well, don't you know? I'm Túlia, the criminal who, to avenge your abandonment, blinded you and killed the woman you loved... Oh, Drúsus, may you, in this hour of tremendous atonement, forgive my crimes... Say one word and I'll die at your feet!

- Túlia? Are you Túlia? - he shouted, trying to push her away. But then, as if by force, he drew her to his bosom and continued:

- Guilty... yes... criminal even, I forgive you, Túlia, because I also have something to blame and to repent: I awoke, I fed your hopes to destroy them to the point of crime... You've cruelly punished my betrayal, true, but it's not for me to judge you, especially now when we are both going to succumb. Let's die together, let's die in peace...

Quavering, sobbing, broken in tears, she clasped him in her arms and pressed her head to his chest.

- Oh, I'm suffocating, I can't do it anymore... - he collapsed, deflated.

A torrent of lava erupted in the room, filling it with asphyxiating gases.

Túlia, already half unconscious, covered her head with her cloak and clung closely to her companion's inert body.

The vengeful and criminal woman that "chance" had brought together, "in extremis", the man she had loved passionately, could hardly have imagined that there, very close by, her daughter was experiencing an agony perhaps more horrifying.

Once alone with the two tigers that Rutuba had unleashed,

Dafné had, first, a fit of rage and terror, bordering on madness.

Forgetting everything, she rolled over on the ground, giving furious cries interspersed with exhortations to the infernal gods and pleas to her husband, swearing eternal fidelity to him if he would rid her of the beasts, who didn't seem to notice her presence.

Understanding, perhaps, the danger that also threatened them, they didn't take advantage of the human prey that was offered to them there.

Finally, exhausted, hoarse, the girl curled up in the center of the courtyard...

Her hair was in piles, her hands were clenched on her chest, and her eyes were gazing at the pair of sentries who, with matted hair and wagging tail, prowled the wall as if looking for a way out.

The compact wall, however, didn't offer them even a single gap where they could fix their claws; and the door was only solidly bolted. They clawed in vain on their hind legs and roared deafeningly at each new tremor of the ground. Eventually they lay down, staring at the

girl with their greenish pupils.

The wretch's overexcited brain was barely functioning; in the thunder of her terrors, it came to her mind that her misdeeds had exhausted the patience of the immortal gods, that Pluto himself was churning the ground with his pitchfork and unleashing all the evils of his orc on the surface.

He then tried to babble a prayer, but his lips refused to obey. The darkness increased by the instant, the sooty sky zinged with lightning and flashes of thunder, the volcanic detonations seemed to shake the world to its foundations.

The tigers began to crawl toward him. He closed his eyes, waiting for the first bite that would tear his flesh apart...

But the terrible felines didn't really want to devour her... They too, trembling and shivering, leaned against her as if seeking help from the human being!

At that august moment when the raging elements of Nature threatened to destroy everyone, there would no longer be any barriers between man and brute; they would no longer be adversaries, but similar, although in different degrees of purification. The same eternal principle that animated them, united them in the face of common danger, in the same feeling of fear and weakness.

Dafné stood motionless between the two animals, listening to their loud, gasping breaths.

One of the tigers had rested its large and heavy head on her knees, while a layer of ash gradually covered the strange group thus formed: *a woman guarded by two beasts!*

Then, everything disappeared under a brownish sheet, which for twenty centuries would fossilize the ill-fated "city" in a stone sarcophagus...

.....

At the door of the amphitheater, Semprônius and his men met Virgília, Metela, and their husbands.

- What's up, Agripa? Have you decided to bring the little ones? For my part, I think it's too early to get them used to these circus pleasures.

- I completely agree: I really didn't intend to bring them, but, what do you want? - and making a face - there is no way to attend to women... Surely you forget that my Metela had a dream, no more and no less than the destruction of our Herculaneum? For her fear now is that she will take her children everywhere with her. So, there was no remedy but to bring them, and for the rest, I've already promised her that we will spend a few months there in our house on the

outskirts of Naples, whose lease has expired, and where I intend to make major renovations for a new contract.

Semprônius burst out laughing.

- I see that you're really a good husband, and you understand the advantage of timely compromises; but you, Metela, I always thought you were braver... How can you, in fact, you, always sensible and thoughtful, let yourself be so impressed by a simple dream?

- What do you want, my friend? It's not in me, I can't master this vague presentiment that haunts me as much as it scares me. If it's only an illusion, so much the better, because I'll gladly endure Agripa's whirlwinds...

This, he said, as he climbed the stairs that led to the ladies' box seats.

The men remained talking below, until they also took their seats, next to that of the host Hatérius Rúfus.

The spectacle was going on with great excitement, each one paying more attention to the games in the arena, when Metela touched the arm of the questor's daughter, who was standing next to her:

- Pompônia, look at "that" there on top of Vesuvius.... It's extraordinary, I've never seen such a thing!

The other raised her eyes and stared in amazement at the white cloud, cooled by flashes of coruscation and lightning, growing, always rising in the form of a gigantic frond.

There was a moment when the crackling of something like a boiling caldron overpowered the screaming of the amphitheater.

- What a dreadful thing! - said Pompônia, looking pale - Perhaps we should leave immediately and board the ship without further delay? I'll send for the children, because it seems that on board, we'll always be safer...

- That's what I was going to propose - replied Metela, getting up. - Virgília, Drusila, come on, prevention is always better than cure.

Startled and moved, they went downstairs and sent a circus employee to call their husbands, who, excited and distracted by the spectacle, saw, and heard nothing. Nevertheless, they soon arrived, laughing, but equally annoyed.

Hatérius Rúfus took the floor:

- By the beards of Jupiter, my lady! What was this idea of calling us in at the best of the party? Are you crazy, Pompônia? How can we embark without dinner? What about our party so well organized? And you think I'm capable of carrying my friends around like this, on an empty stomach, without knowing why or for what? Come on! All this alarm for a little bit of smoke... I'm willing to bet my head that all this

dread is...

He couldn't finish, the walls of the circus shook violently, and a subterranean rumble, followed by loud bangs, overwhelmed everything. There was a general expectation, a minute of mournful silence, and then piercing screams, an infernal clatter and the stamping of thousands of feet, an avalanche of people stampeding, squeezing, rushing, crushing...

Márcus Fábius warned:

- Let's go to the imperial box, which is unoccupied, until the wave passes, even because if we remain here, we will be scattered or crushed. The women in the center...

Everyone approved, formed a chain, and with difficulty the group, thus formed into a block, was able to reach the gallery where, incidentally, they had already found other people no less wary of the commotion and rushing about.

While they waited anxiously, the mountain covered with fire and the sky became more and more sooty.

Márcus Fábius, who had been melancholy since the morning, turned to his wife and said:

- As we leave here, you'll proceed with Semprônius and Nero to the galley, while I'll go to Herculaneum to see if I can save our little son. I'm counting on being able to return in time to board with you, but if I can't, I'll go straight to Naples, where we'll meet.

The girl sighed, visibly disfigured.

- No, don't go; if our treasure can be saved, the nanny and Fábia will be there to guard it; but if you still insist, I want to go with you so that we can die together on the cradle of our little son... You won't go alone, I don't want to, I don't consent.

She clung nervously to her husband's robe and fixed her beautiful blue gaze on him, tinged with tears.

In those translucent eyes there was such anguish, such an eloquent expression of love, that the gentleman inflated his chest and let out a great sigh of relief.

Then, forgetting everything, the moment, and the circumstances, he pressed her to his heart.

- Virgília, my dear, my beloved wife, you don't know how well those words silence me... Oh, forgive the unworthy suspicion that has clouded my mind since this morning... But I've just read in your eyes that you don't love that you can't love another man...

- But what other man? - she babbled with such amazement and ingenuity, that the last doubts of the young patrician were dispelled.

A new shock, more violent than the first, interrupted the

conversation.

- Let's go - said Semprônius - or we'll stay here under the rubble.

They left. It was impossible to find the cars and litters already driven God knows where. As far as circumstances would allow, the small entourage set off on foot toward the port.

The great human molehill had run out, but if the fugitives on the one hand succeeded in finding a more untroubled path, on the other, they had lost precious time, since a thick, burning ash began to blind and oppress them, making it difficult for them to breathe.

Blazing rocks of all sizes rained down in bulk, injuring some, killing others, and increasing the confusion and terror in everyone.

Hatérius and his family walked in front, followed by Agripa and his wife, with their children on their laps. Behind them, Cláudius held Drusila, half unconscious, and finally Virgília, glued to her husband's arm. Beside them, silent, gloomy, Nero and Semprônius seemed to be sleepwalking.

Semprônius stopped often at the risk of getting lost in the crowd, in which he could see, or rather, he guessed, he wanted to find Cáius Lucílius. This preoccupation took him away from everything and everyone.

They were more than halfway there, when another tremor, more violent than the previous ones, caused the earth to shake and many people to fall, especially women.

And, as if that subterranean vibration was intensifying the volcanic activity, an immense black cloud gushed out of the crater and spread a veritable rain of red rocks all over the environment.

Virgília, stricken, had also fallen. Nero and Fábius hurried to lift her up and tried to slow her pace, when a stone, whizzing, struck the latter's forehead, and he fell flat on his face without a groan.

The girl threw herself at her husband's inert body, trying hard to lift him, but as soon as she saw him motionless, wide-eyed, gushing blood from his nostrils and mouth, she gave a piercing scream and fell over the corpse.

Nero leaned over to the unfortunate couple...

- "He has nothing left" - he murmured, trembling, and, taking the girl in his arms, he quickened his steps more.

His heart was beating violently... At last, there she was in his arms, just as he had so often wished, the "golden butterfly"!

Her beloved head rested on his shoulder, and those scented hairs caressed his face. All in all, she was now free...

Despite the mortal danger that threatened them on all sides, the boy tightened his grip on his precious burden, while in his eyes

gleamed sparks of hope for a radiant future.

At last, they reached the edge of the sea, already crowded with boats overcrowded with fugitives.

Not far from the beach, the ques-tor's galley was swinging, all decked out in banners and floral garlands for the programmed night feast. Two scalpers crossed along the beach, avoiding getting close, so as not to be invaded by the mob in a demented flight.

Those who swam, even then, tried to do so, were repulsed with paddle strokes.

A man standing in the prow of the scaler trying to recognize the fugitives, the quaestor found his trusted servant, who had been on board since morning.

- Créstus! - he shouted and waved - This way, quickly!

In an instant the scalers pulled up and Créstus rushed towards his master, kissing his toga:

- Blessed are the gods who allow me to see you again! It wasn't in vain that we came across this place... But, let's go, because it seems that the world is about to end.

- Let us wait so that I may yet prove my gratitude to you for your providence and for those tears in the hour of danger. Now, try to accommodate these women and children as best you can.

Everyone embarked, except Semprônius, who declared he was staying on land, to look for Cáius who, he thought, must have been lost in the crowd. Hatérius and Agripa then grabbed him by the wrists and, almost by force, forced him to board.

Soon, they approached the galley; the women immediately retired to their cabins, where Metela, disfigured and always silent, tried to help Virgília, who was still unconscious.

Drusila, with her face covered in her clasped hands, was in a sort of stupor, and Pompônia filled the room with cries and lamentations, because only her oldest son, 13 years old, was there, while the two younger ones stayed in Pompeii.

And the horrible end that awaited them was heartbreaking for a mother.

The men remained on deck, gazing in horror at the panorama of the coastline and the city, shrouded in reddish mist, from which Vesuvius was emerging like a giant torch.

When Hatérius ordered them to drop the cloth, Semprônius took hold of his arm and begged him to wait until Cáius appeared. Now, he imagined, his son must be on one of those ships sailing in all directions.

- My poor friend - answered the Quaestor - if I were to comply with

your wish, we would all succumb, with no chance of saving your son. As you said, he would have returned to Herculaneum, and the catastrophe surely surprised him on his way, so I assume that he fled in another direction. To cross the bulwark of fire and ash that surrounds Pompeii would be madness, and, on the other hand, notice the agitation of the sea... We must not waste time, if we want to save the innocents sheltered here.

The old patrician bowed his head and descended with the others into the inner chamber of the ship.

Upon entering his cabin, Agripa took his wife's hands in his, very moved:

- All razed, all destroyed! There will be no stone left upon stone of Herculaneum and Pompeii...

She stared at her husband with her eyes moist with tears:

- I've never considered myself so rich as at this moment to see you here, safe and sound, beside our little children; meanwhile, I weep for Virgília who, poor thing, perhaps it would be better for her not to awaken from her swoon.

- You're right, both she and poor Semprônius are to be pitied. Enfeebled, exasperated, he - Semprônius - had collapsed on a chair, indifferent to what was going on around him.

He hadn't even heard Pompônia's cries. Hatérius and his son- in-law ended up taking him to another room.

Agripa tried to comfort him, but a single thought absorbed his entire being - Cáius, his treasure, his joy, the only solace of his lonely old age was lost, dead perhaps like Fábius, the handsome and young patrician who was generally esteemed...

And Fábia, his old mother, confidant, and glutton of all times, should also have perished, swallowed up in the voracity of the elements...

He had nothing, nothing left in the world! He compressed his chest, sighed deeply, while noticing Nero's profile, who, nervous and frowning, was leaning on the wall.

There was the repudiated son, the exiled one, and that was the one that the merciless fate had reserved for him for the end of his life... Oh, Nêmesis, terrible is thy sword - he murmured, plunging his face into his hands.

Unfortunate Semprônius! He didn't understand that fate, snatching away his beloved son, offered him the opportunity to open his ulcerated heart to his bored son. She didn't take the opportunity to attract that blackened and galvanized by jealousy soul.

And that hour, which could have prevented more than one future

misfortune, slipped away into eternity, only to dig a deeper chasm between father and son.

Coming to her senses, aware of her misfortune, Virgília burst into tears.

Metela kept offering her consolations, but there are pains that only time can alleviate. Once her tears had dried, she looked around and her tired eyes only saw Semprônius, sitting with his head supported, or rather, hanging from his hands. She noticed the tears trickling from his fingers, and at the sight of the creature she had known since childhood and had been used to seeing always haughty, to the point of considering him inaccessible, invulnerable to all despair. - Virgília was possessed by the most vivid compassion. Forgetting for a moment her own misfortune, she knelt next to him and, caressing his face with her feverish little hands, she murmured sobbingly:

- Poor friend, for canst thou weep? Let us mingle, then, our tears, for we have both lost what was dearest to us in the world. ¨

The old patrician stood up. Who could cry with him? When he noticed Virgília's ringlets of hair, the girl who had so often bounced on his knee, the childish little comrade from Cáius, came to his mind, and she alone controlled his impulses with the gentleness of a doll. Then he remembered that she too had lost everything in the catastrophe.

Silently, he held her in his arms, while a flood of tears eased her heart.

With dry eyes and trembling lips, Nero looked at the moving picture, and was filled with jealousy at the tears shed in memory of Cáius Lucílius.

He was definitely a useless being... What more doubts could he harbor? That strange woman was giving consolations to her father, who girded and stroked her like a daughter, while he, the only surviving son, had not even been noticed. He had the intuition that his approach would be painful to Semprônius, and as much as he thought it, he lowered his head, dejected, and abruptly galloped up the deck.

A dark, starless night shrouded the earth. Only the flaming Vesuvius, in the distance, blurred into the sea with reddish hues of fire.

He leaned on the rail and, with a heavy frown fixed on the darkness that surrounded him, began to imagine it as less dense than his own future...

What did fate still have in store for him, his existence miraculously spared in that lugubrious trance?

To what end would he let himself be cradled, there like that, in the belly of that skiff that, with its sails unfurled, flew over the waves like an Alcíone?

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

JUPITER
AND JESUS

I

The hermit

But the growing darkness, on the one hand, and the rain of fire and ash, on the other, made them lose the real road, so that, in the middle of the countryside, they were not sure where they were and in which direction they were going.

Twice they tried to find their way, until, unable to go any further, they stood up.

The young patrician felt bad: fine needles seemed to pierce his brain; he began to see everything red, and at the same time he was bathing in cold sweat.

- I can't go on, everything's spinning around me - he said, suffering the animal, which, under the double charge, was trembling on its legs and covered in foam, was bleeding from its nostrils. - I'm going to lie down here and rest for a while. You, Rutuba, take care of Grandma and go on with the others. We can't give up on finding a shelter where we can give the poor old woman the help she requires. Your horses are less exhausted and will still be able to reach any town or village. As soon as you can accommodate Grandma, come, and get me here, or else we will meet in Rome, since I'll go there as soon as I feel better.

- But, keep one slave at least, boss....

You're visibly sick, and you want to stay here alone?

- Well, Rutuba, a woman always needs an escort, and I... you know, I've my dagger and a purse here... Do as I say and don't waste any time, even because this is more fatigue than illness.

Although upset, Rutuba had to obey, and soon the cavalcade's trot was lost in the distance.

Once alone, Cáius Lucílius lay down on the grass and examined the place: it was a mountainous region. The little beaten path, on which the retinue had disappeared, sloped down and went into the thick forest; but to the left there was a stony path that led up to the rocky summits, which were also thickly wooded.

After lingering for about an hour, he got up and, already overcome by a burning thirst, decided to follow that trail, hoping to find some spring or shepherd's hut to quench his thirst. Gently, he stumbled down that path, not very steep but very winding, which sank into the mountain. How long he walked like this, not even he himself could know; but what is certain is that, suddenly, he heard the bubbling of a waterfall, while a pale moonbeam gave him a glimpse of a fountain, which, gushing from a rock, formed a natural pool. He knelt

and tried with his cupped hands to catch the crystalline lymph, but at the same moment he became dizzy, saw everything black, and collapsed, fainting, on the carpet of moss that surrounded the small basin.

Long, silent, heavy hours passed, until the dawn broke over the horizon.

Footsteps were heard. On the top of the mountain a human silhouette appeared, descending. It approached the source. He was a tall man, wrapped in a gray habit. He was quite old, but still showed a certain youthfulness and vigor.

His back was somewhat arched, and his face was lined with deep wrinkles, yet his brown eyes mirrored a mixture of goodness, sweetness, and infinite melancholy.

His thick, silver beard was dying at his waist and gave his whole personality a suggestion of venerable majesty.

When he saw a figure lying there, inert, he stopped, somewhat surprised, and then, hastening to his feet, he bent down and tried to examine it.

- A patrician! - he exclaimed - How and why would he end up here?

He took some water, wet his temples and face, then rubbed his freezing hands...

A quarter of an hour more and the boy, opening his eyes in astonishment, circumambulated his surroundings and murmured:

- Where am I?

The old man helped him up and asked vividly:

- Who are you and by what work of chance do you find yourself here, in this state and in this wilderness? The young man passed his hand across his forehead as if trying to connect ideas.

- I left Herculaneum, my hometown, in a hasty flight from the eruption of Vesuvius, which threatened to destroy it. It was chance that brought me to these parts. I'm exhausted, but everything is spinning around me, I can hardly walk. If you can give me any shelter where I can find comfort, enough to continue, I'll be immensely grateful.

- If you come from Herculaneum, you can boast of an admirable achievement... Lean on me, son; let's go to my house, which is nearby, because I can see that you need absolute rest.

It wasn't without great cost that, supporting the wavering stranger, he led him to his chamber, a hundred paces away. There, in front of a crevice half covered by the foliage of a rustic vine, the old man stopped and led his companion into a spacious cave, furnished with a table of boards and trunks, which served as chairs. In one corner was a bed of dry leaves, lined with sheepskins.

Laying the staggering young man on him, the anchorite ran to a sort of niche dug at the bottom and pulled out a woolen blanket, a cup, and a wine jug.

- I usually reserve for my sick a few treats that I don't grant myself - he said, smiling naturally, satisfied. - For myself, I live only for prayer and through prayer; I need nothing else... However, whenever I've the joy of receiving a guest, I like to comfort him with a good drink.

Thus speaking, he stretched out his blanket and presented him with a glass and a piece of bread. The boy drank greedily, but without touching the bread, he fell back on his bed in a deep, agitated sleep. A general tremor shook his whole body, and suddenly, as if pulled out of his torpor, he awoke in a feverish delirium. He thought he was standing in front of Vesuvius, struck by fiery lavas burning his flesh. And he rolled on his bed of crunchy leaves, moaning, and calling for Fábia and his father.

The praying hermit, sitting on a rock outside the cave, hurriedly reentered the cave and listened with interest to what the sick man was saying. The purpose of Cáius' delirium had changed: he was now reviewing Dafné and the scene that had preceded the tragedy; he was looking for the dagger that he should drive into the heart of the torpid Apolônius.

- Poor creature! So young and already betrayed in life... unless all this is the ravings of fever... - murmured the old man, as he laid his hands on his forehead.

Soon, he seemed to calm down and closed his eyes.

A few days passed without any noticeable improvement in the sick man's condition. The old hermit never ceased to intervene in a loving and solicitous manner, praying at the sick man's bedside, laying his hands on him when his delirium became exacerbated. One night, his illness suddenly worsened: burning up with fever, his eyes hollow with purple eyelids, the boy lay motionless, and only through his wheezing, stentorian breathing could it be said that he still had remnants of life left in him.

Distressed and troubled, the solitary man retreated to the bottom of the cave. In the cavity already being interviewed, a narrow opening closed by a leather curtain and entirely veiled by the fading shadow of the rock's anfractuosities, led to a second crypt, smaller than the other. In the center of this crypt, barely lit by lamps hanging from the vault, was a large, deep basin filled with water; further down, carved into the stone, an altar with a cross, and, on it, the life-size image of a crucified man.

This image, which, as a work of art, left much to be desired,

nevertheless revealed great inspiration: The head girded with a crown of thorns was admirable; and the expression of anguish, touched with divine softness, was such as to honor a great sculptor.

The hermit approached that strange altar and kneeling down he held out his hands in supplication: "Good and divine master, j thou who hast taught me to know the true and only Üeus, father of all creatures, answer my supplication, inspire me the remedy for the sick man whom thou hast referred to me. For you, who converted Gentiles and healed lepers, there are no impure or incurable pagans; all are equally dear to your heart, and wherever there is a sufferer, there you'll be to relieve him..."

He was silent in ecstasy for some time, and when he finally stood up, he had an indefinable serenity stamped on his face. He then approached a basin at the foot of the altar, filled a small silver cup, knelt down, prayed again, and, stretching out his hands above the cup, said in a grave and solemn tone: "Lord Jesus, son of the living God, I invoke upon this water the virtue of your grace, remembering your baptism in the Jordão; saturate this water, Lord, with that renewing fluid of which you're the only source for the healing of the body, since, pure, you purify whatever you touch."

After prostrating himself and kissing the edges of the laver, he filled a jug of that water and returned to the sick man. He moistened his parched lips, wet cloths, and applied them to his forehead. This done, he returned to his place on the tree trunk and continued to pray silently.

Suddenly, the patient stood up, widening his eyes: - Look! - he exclaimed, pointing to the bottom of the cave - it's the sun rising and flooding us with its golden light! Ah, it's Jupiter himself who descends from the celestial arches, supported by diamond clouds. His clarity blinds me! But how merciful and sweet is his gaze!

He fell silent and fell back exhausted. The old man prostrated himself with his face close to the ground, and when he got up and leaned over the sick man, he noticed, moved, that he was deeply asleep.

- Great is Your mercy, Lord! - Renewing the compress, he murmured: - Poor thing... sleep, recover the energies of your exhausted body.

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* *

It was high noon when Cáius awoke. The fever had completely disappeared, a marble pallor had replaced the burning redness of his

cheeks, but the extreme weakness remained.

Noticing the hermit at his bedside, he said:

- I wish I could, but I can't rise.

- There is no need to hurry, son; you need a long rest, for you've just overcome a dangerous illness, and before a week you'll not be able to fully recover. Now, drink this, and don't strain yourself talking.

He presented him with a soft drink, reached for the covers, and soon the sick man's pupils closed into a deep, restful sleep.

Despite the hermit's care, his convalescence proceeded extremely slowly. Wanting to distract him in conversation, one day João (as he called himself) asked him who he was and what family he came from. The boy gave his name and even told the details of his escape.

- Ah - exclaimed the old man - you belong to a rich and illustrious family. I knew your grandfather when he was the commander of a legion in Gálias, and it seems that he was a noble and valiant soldier, since he was very severe, even ruthless, in matters of discipline. If you're not too tired now, tell me: what has become of him and what is he doing now?

Let's see: don't lower your head so much, don't get so upset... I understand your apprehension about the fate of Semprônius, your father, but since he's supposed to be at a party on board, it's very likely that he was able to escape the catastrophe.

Cáius acceded to his benefactor's wishes and more than once they dealt with the matter. However, most of the time he spent lying down, melancholy and entirely absorbed in his poignant thoughts. Besides the natural anguish over the fate of his father and the friends who had accompanied him to Pompeii, the memory of his wife haunted him with atrocious insistence. At times, it was as if he had his beloved wife before him, with her bloody flesh cut up by the beasts. And savage vengeance no longer flattered his haunted spirit. No one could know of his act, but, nevertheless, he felt oppressed and wanted now, as never before, to recline on his grandmother's lap to cry freely. However, there wasn't a tear that would relieve him! Sometimes, in the silence of the night, it was the desperate cries, the pleas of Dafné that hurt his ears, without knowing how to avoid them. In this intimate struggle, he tried to pray to Jupiter, but the supplication was useless, because the truth is that he didn't know how to pray, he had never had the opportunity to approach the divinity through prayer. Always fortunate, from the cradle on, esteemed and flattered by everyone, he had only one sacred duty until then, which was to thank the immortals for the gifts with which they had endowed him.

It was the first time in his life that he saw and felt alone,

abandoned, unhappy and tortured in his conscience.

In this case, his invocation became rather a murmur, a deaf rebellion, which poisoned rather than calmed the spirit.

The peaceful voice and serene countenance of the anachronist gave him a certain relief, and for this reason, too, he never tired of watching him while the old man prepared meals or morning and evening tea for him.

And this is how he eventually noticed the weekly visit of a young peasant, who always brought a basket of provisions. He also noticed that together, they never failed to disappear into the depths of the cave, where the old man, even if alone, never failed to retire every day, staying there for long hours.

He spent a long time wondering what that mysterious retreat could mean, until he suspected the existence of a second cave and decided to find out.

In the afternoon, while sitting in front of the cave admiring the sunset, he said:

- Good friend, don't think me bold and indiscreet, but I suspect that you don't share my faith... Could it be that you belong to that Christian sect that is being talked about so much in the empire?

The old man bowed his head:

- Yes, indeed I'm a Christian and one of the first Christians, that is why I witnessed the last moments of the Divine Master, whose unworthy disciple I'm today. In conformity with his teachings, here I live far from the temptations of the world, praying, caring for the sick, trying to relieve those who suffer, to the best of my ability. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can disturb my sacred memories, and that is why I consider myself and am truly happy.

- For I also consider myself happy to be able to finally learn the truth about your sect, which is said to have a magician as its founder, and moreover, that your mysterious cult includes ceremonies that are as licentious as they are hateful. I, however, have always considered such things incompatible with the patience, indulgence and unbreakable faith with which Christians prefer to endure all martyrdoms, rather than to abjure. What do you say? Paternally kind, as you're, your word is worth, to me, for the unrestricted truth itself.

- Those who detract and accuse us in such a way, don't know our doctrine, and even less our divine Redeemer, so great and so pure, that even those who have seen him don't understand him. I don't say this to convert you, my son, although to believe and to cherish Jesus is the greatest grace of all.

- Oh, my good friend, then tell me what you know about this

singular man who was able to inspire his disciples with such faith that defies all tortures and even death... Yes, because, I must say, I've also dreamed about him here... Bis it true that he preached forgiveness of offenses and humility, that he prescribed to do good for evil, to enemies? I beg you, Father João, tell me how you met him, what he told you, and I swear to keep everything in the strictest confidence.

- Well then: I'm reading honesty and generosity in your eyes, and I consent to entrust you with my past. I'll tell you how I met Jesus and became a Christian. It is a moving story, containing great teachings, and to hear it and enjoy it, you need to recover, at least physically. So, try to regain your strength and then you'll hear what you want to know.

There was no way he could not accept the decision, and the old man helped him to get up and return to bed. Another few days went by without any appreciable change. It's true that Cáius regained his strength, thanks to the hermit's substantial food, but his state of mind remained as dull as ever. The memory of the last hours of Herculaneum nagged at his conscience; and if his nights were spent in cruel insomnia, rolling over in bed, he spent his days also shrunk, apathetic, refractory to the open air of the mountain.

The good hermit, who in those few weeks had grown sincerely fond of his guest, who was as beautiful as he was renowned for his care, anxiously followed the trials and tribulations of his intimate struggle, until one evening, after he had served him a bowl of excellent broth, he said, as he ran his hand through his thick hair:

- My son, I see with sadness that your physical health isn't restored, because your soul is sick.... But what grief can so oppress a young heart that you can't sleep?

The boy answered nothing, but let his head hang down on the chest of the old man, who held him tightly.

- Your silence, my son, reveals to me better than words the extent of any fault that pricks your conscience, but if it repels you to discover to your old friend the ulcers of your soul, come with me, let's go there where I usually find relief for my troubled spirit. Let's go; I'll ask with you, so that the evil genius, which has dragged you into the path of sin and still rejoices in your sufferings, may leave you once and for all. The One I'm about to show you said: "Come to me, you sinners, you wretches, I'll give you rest!

As if overwhelmed by an intimate, incoherent need for prayer and repentance, Cáius followed the Hermit to the mysterious sanctuary. The dimness that filled the room, the oscillating light of the lamps illuminating the cross with its martyr in the background, reacted

victoriously in the sensitive and passionate soul of the boy. There, then, was the God of the humble and unfortunate! And that God didn't stand on a throne wielding thunderbolt, like Jupiter! Nor did his servants say: the one who is dearest to the deity is the one who offers him the richest sacrifices... But, on the contrary, that God was looking for the poor, the fallen of fortune!

The old man knelt before the altar and said:

- Let us pray that you may have peace....

Already possessed of veneration and a certain awe, Cáius Lucílius also knelt down and had his gaze immediately drawn, irresistibly, to the face of the image, which seemed to lean toward him and say with infinite sweetness: - "I understand your suffering; come to me, I'll relieve you."

- Son - says the hermit approaching - the one you see represented there knew the human heart deeply; turn to him and he will understand you... His clemency was only infinite, and when surrounded by his enemies who had just crucified him, he still exhorted forgiveness for them, as if he knew that death is nothing but liberation from earthly pain, and that suffering is the touchstone of acquired patience, faith, and love. Condemning and punishing is always easier than forgiving and correcting.

Deeply troubled, the young patrician joined hands, unable to explain the unusual attraction of this unknown God to whom he had just prayed. The carnal and blind man could hardly presume that his spirit had just recognized the divine guide of the eternal homeland, overjoyed at having found him again. His pale cheeks were colored, his eyes shone with exaltation, and it seemed to him that all the light of the lamps was concentrated on the countenance of the Crucified One, surrounding him with an auriferous halo, while a wave of beneficent heat exhaled from the tree, penetrating, and relieving him.

The hope of seeing his father and all those who were dear to him returned to him, while the image and the bloody end of Dafné faded in the retina of his spirit... But, in compensation, he began to judge himself, saw at a glance his own faults, his ultrathin blindness, and humbled himself intimately... Calm, then, with a calm he had not enjoyed for a long time, he turned to his companion who, arms outstretched, seemed immersed in blissful ecstasy:

- My father, great is the power of your God! Let me tell you here and now what you don't know about my life, so that you can tell me, in the presence of this merciful God, what I must do to remove the avenging shadow of a victim.

- Speak, son - said the lonely man, holding out his arms - there are

no unforgivable faults before a sincere repentance that leads to penance.

The boy sat down at his feet and in a quick, synthetic and colorful speech, he pictured Fábia, Semprônius and their carefree, clear, happy existence until the day of his meeting with Dafné; he made him see how, out of an excess of love for him, his grandmother and his father, so austere and haughty, had agreed to the marriage and welcomed with open arms that uneducated and fortuneless commoner; Then, in a growing agitation, he described all the moral tortures inflicted on him by this ungrateful creature, whom he had generously plucked from mud and misery, and who, as soon as she was married, began to hate all who were dear to him, culminating in the ignominy of betrayal...

Bright-eyed and flushed, he unrolled for the old anchorite the panel of the last scenes that preceded the disorderly flight and finally how, warned by a trusted servant, he had been able, with his own eyes, to be sure of his vilification and how, in a sort of hallucination, he had killed the traitor and given his wife to the beasts to graze.

- Now, my father, her ghost follows me relentlessly, I see her at every step, she is before me rolling on the floor, and her cries of anguish, her desperate pleas are ringing in my ears, they are really driving me mad. Tell me, Father, what I must, what I can, what I must do...

So, he ended, letting his feverish head hang on his confessor's knees.

- I'm not, I can't be a judge, my son: the temptation was certainly great for your young spirit, outraged and betrayed. You could hardly exempt yourself from punishing the wicked and condemnable woman in the face of all human laws; however, the divine Master, who expired on the cross to redeem our faults, said in the name of the heavenly Father that the judgment belonged to Him alone... The truth is that the justice of the One who rules the Universe is much more fearful than your petty revenge, which didn't go beyond the annihilation of a body, since He is the lord of souls, that is, of the indestructible thought, which survives the body and remains the factor of all your evils.

Remember that vengeance binds enemies together, just as it binds the benefit that is done to them.

Whenever you spitefully think of this perfidious creature, who also hates you for the horrible end you've brought upon him, the evil feelings of both will chain together more strongly than if they were friendly; but when your victim's hatred meets your forgiveness and

your prayer on his behalf, he will feel relieved, ashamed of himself, and eventually leave you. Therefore, my son, and the dispenser of grace and forgiveness will grant you rest from invisible enemies, far more fearful than the visible ones. In his passage through Earth, one day, preaching to the people, the Master affirmed that everyone who knows how to pray handles the strongest of the levers given to the human creature, because Faith carries mountains.

- Everything you say about the teachings of your God only proves his profound wisdom. I've just experienced his power, and even now, more than ever, I desire to know him. Will you, today, confide to me what you know about his life and deeds? - ended up by saying Cáius Lucílius with eyes of enthusiastic radiance, bordering on exaltation.

- With great pleasure, and because the moment seems to me to be the right one to reveal to you my conversion to Christianity, since you're calmed by our prayers.

But, since the emotions of this happy hour have knocked your physical energies, let's take some food first.

They went to the first cave and soon each had a bowl of milk and a piece of bread. Then the old hermit spoke thus:

- This is about a past that goes back a long way, and before I retrace it, it is important, for the sake of clarity, to tell you about myself. My father was a soldier and, as such, was often absent from home. My mother, with my brothers, lived in the house of my grandfather, a wealthy and wise philosopher, so that I had a relatively happy and carefree youth. Intelligent and lively, my grandfather took great interest in my education, and such was the ease of my understanding that he even entertained the project of making me a wise man.

My father, however, thought otherwise and I soon had to embrace a career in arms. I did my first training in Massília, in Gálias, under the command of your grandfather, and from there I was sent to Jerusalem, in Judea, a province then governed by Pôncio Pilate. I must tell you that the job of governor of Judea wasn't without its dangers and difficulties, especially for a proud and violent man like Pilate, since the Jewish people were such a turbulent and fanatical people. The slightest of faults, the slightest administrative oversight, they, the Jews, denounced directly to the Emperor, even though they never stopped plotting and dreaming of the restoration of their political sovereignty. You understand that, in such a country and with such people, it was necessary to be shrewd and sharp-eyed. Well, Divine Providence allowed this contingency to give me the opportunity to meet the Savior, and to bring about my conversion.

I've already told you that I was better educated than my comrades.

Above all, I had great facility in learning languages, a circumstance which greatly facilitated my service and my relations with the natives of the countries I traveled.

In Jerusalem, I occupied a room in the house of a Galilean, an honest and poor man with a large family. One of the daughters, a beautiful girl, pleased me extremely. Consider that I was then in the prime of life and had a head full of worldly illusions. (I said this as if moved by the recollection of those reminiscences).

The fact is that to better understand myself with Abigail, I tried to learn more quickly her dialect, which wasn't the pure Hebrew, but the one generally spoken by the people. It was in their home that I first heard about Jesus. They had seen him on the occasion of his return to Jerusalem and witnessed the miraculous healing of several sick people, while they referred to his preaching, possessed of enthusiastic veneration.

I was immediately interested in that extraordinary personality, until one day I was called by my commander, who said to me: "Quirílius Cornélius, I'm going to entrust you with a secret work, which your knowledge of the popular language will make easier: it seems that for more than two years a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, has been roaming all over Galilee and the bordering provinces, preaching a new doctrine, healing the sick and performing other miracles. None of these interests me, nor would it concern me, if I had not received a secret warning from the Supreme Pontiff, who reveals that this man has political purposes, because he claims to be a descendant of ancient monarchs and wants to be acclaimed king of Israel. It is therefore indispensable to find out the legitimacy of these rumors. Try to disguise yourself as best you can and penetrate these assemblies, and it will not be difficult for you to find the prophet among the crowd, who are said to be following him everywhere. When you're well acquainted with everything, you'll report back to me."

Satisfied with this mandate that would satisfy my curiosity, I went into the house and immediately learned that the prophet from Nazareth wasn't far from the city. At my request, one of Abigail's brothers offered to take me to the place indicated. I tried to disguise myself as much as possible and we left late in the evening to enjoy the coolness of the night.

Following information from passers-by, we finally reached a hill on whose slope there was a picturesque grouping of a considerable crowd. Some sitting, others standing and some kneeling, all seemed possessed of mystical exaltation. In the center of the semi-circle,

leaning against the trunk of a tree, was a man of medium height, wearing a white tunic and a dark cloak.

I entered the crowd and tried to position myself as best I could to see and hear the preacher, but at first sight, when I saw his thin, regular features, my heart was moved. In fact, what I had before me was a unique personality, unmistakable, radiating an irresistible charm and fascination. Silky, ringed, brown hair rolled down her shoulders, molding a pale face, slightly toasted by the sun; her mouth was drawn in a symptomatic pleating of energy, but energy tempered by an indefinable kindness. It must be said, however, that what was most impressive were his eyes of a deep blue, with a shade of sapphires and an agility of expression that seemed to make them change, as if they were either black and bright, or blue and soft, of the blue softness of the celestial vault. He discoursed on the immortality of the soul, spoke of the frivolity of earthly pleasures and of the delights that constitute the patrimony of the poor, of the suffering, in the kingdom of the heavenly Father. I don't feel able to reproduce his words, because no one else could have given his divine eloquence, which moved and consoled; the magic of that voice that plunged into the smallest layers of the people, and whose modulations and resonances timbered all the fibers of the soul.

Excited, overwhelmed, I listened to him with growing eagerness, amazed in my inmost being how such a creature could be considered dangerous, since the detachment he preached could only make men dis ambitious and humble.

At that moment, life seemed to me to be useless to me, if it didn't tend toward the heavenly goal that I described and inculcated. When the sermon was over, the crowd gathered around the Master, several sick people were presented to him, and I saw with my own eyes that a child, whose legs were paralyzed, was instantly cured at the touch of his mother? Then the stampede began, and He, followed by a few men (who I was told were the disciples), went down the hillside. Passing close to me, he suddenly stopped, and dipping his deep, unspeakable gaze into mine, he murmured softly: Centurion, renounce your task, for my word has penetrated your heart; Just, you'll be with me, and be convinced that those who told your chief to watch me have something else in mind...

He followed, smiling slightly, leaving me petrified. Was he a sorcerer? Or was it a God who guessed my thoughts and unveiled, through disguise, the task that had led me there?

Deeply troubled, I returned to Jerusalem, and in my report, I stated that, in my opinion, the man's preaching in no way threatened

the security and peace of the State, but rather tended to remove any worldly ambitions from his disciples.

Upon reading this report, my commander smiled and said: *I'm glad I wasn't mistaken; it's just a matter of personal grievances, of priests and Pharisees wanting to make an enemy of the emperor out of this censor of their abuses.*

From then on, I began to feel a lively interest in Jesus and his teaching. I never lost sight of him again. I had the opportunity to hear him a few more times, whenever service and circumstances allowed. Listening to him, I became convinced that he was a great reformer, who proclaimed equality, condemned injustice, the oppression of the weak by the strong, and appealed to man's conscience in order to raise him to a higher moral level.

So, a few months passed. The Jewish Passover was approaching, and I could not think of the Master's person, all the time taken up with service, because besides the influx of pilgrims who came to celebrate the feasts, the proconsul Pilate had also gone to Jerusalem and there was no lack of extraordinary work.

One night, when I entered the house, tired, I noticed, surprised, that Abigail was waiting for me, and her eyes were red from crying. She then told me that her older brother, who was on guard at the temple, had come in haste to tell her that a great danger threatened the good prophet from Nazareth. It was the case that, days before, when he had entered the city, he had been welcomed and acclaimed with applause and flowers, by a whole crowd in delirium. Priests and Pharisees, furious and disgusted by the event of those greetings to a man who, in their view, disobeyed their commandments and didn't even keep the Sabbaths, were plotting his loss, and, for this purpose, they had already made arrangements with one of the disciples, since David (as Abigail's brother was called) had twice seen one of them approach the High Priest and presumed that, that very night, the prophet would be arrested. Where, he could not tell. Loving Jesus and knowing that I also admired him, David had come to warn her, in the belief that with my help he could still warn the Master in time to escape.

This news embittered me deeply. By the way, I had also heard about that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, but I had not attached pessimistic consequences to the event.

I had been grateful to be able, in an emergency, to save that good man whose life was worth a program of charitable works; but the truth is that I had no idea where I would find him at that moment.

And the great thing is that I couldn't sleep the whole night, with

his serene and lovable physiognomy before my eyes. In vain I excogitated in vain about how I could save him, and as soon as day broke, I rushed to the proconsul's palace. Hoping to find David there, I went around the temple, which wasn't far away, and by the door to the Pontiff's palace, I did indeed meet the young man, who informed me of the arrest and immediate trial of Jesus, already "on his way to the praetorium for Pôncio Pilate's confirmation".

At that point, the hermit fell silent and tried to wipe away the tears that streamed down his face.

Cáius Lucílius, moved, lively questioned:

- And was the innocent condemned? How could Pilate sanction such an iniquity?

- Decrees of Providence, son. It was written in the stars, from the beginning of the world. The proconsul tried to save him, but the people, blinded and fanaticized by the priests, would not allow him to do so. The divine messenger of the heavenly Father had to be outraged, scourged, and condemned to die on the cross. Later I'll tell you about this horrible martyrdom, because for the moment.

I feel unable to do so and want to limit myself to my personal impressions. I already admired and loved Jesus; but in view of his patience, gentleness and superhuman majesty with which he endured all the martyrdoms, I would have bound myself to him irrevocably, so that to save his life I would have given my own life a thousand times over.

Once the sentence had been pronounced, the prisoner was entrusted to my care until he was to leave with two other convicts for the place of torture. In order to spend the few hours that remained, I decided to retire to a room overlooking the courtyard, where the escort remained. Feigning strict vigilance, I stood at the door of the room and finally entered. It was then that I saw Jesus kneeling on a stone bench, all absorbed in fervent prayer. His pale, macerated face showed the atrocious sufferings they had inflicted on him.

- Master - he said, coming closer to me - I can't accept that you're so good and so pure, that you should die such an infamous death... Let me save you, take my armor, this cloak, and this key; open the small door you see there, which leads to a narrow corridor, at the end of which you'll find yourself in a deserted alley; from there you'll go to my house, where dedicated people live who will make it easier for you to escape from the city... Let me die in your place, because the life of an obscure soldier isn't worth the life of someone who, like you, are providential and beneficial to the sick and unfortunate...

He stood up immediately after my first sentences, and his face

exuded a heavenly calm. He looked at me with a veiled look of melancholic sweetness and spoke thus:

"I thank you and greatly appreciate your devotion, but, I can't accept it. No, my friend, I don't deplore my fate, the same as that of the prophets who have gone before me, who were killed by men. But don't suppose, either, that I disdain the sacrifice of your life (his eyes stopped in a vacuum, giving his physiognomy a singular feature), because you'll die for me, and I can see the flames of the fire that awaits you... But that won't be for now...". - And, as if to reject the distant vision, he rubbed his eyes and concentrated.

- What do you mean, my father João? Are you really doomed to die such a horrible death? - said Cáius.

- Son, I once believed that I was destined for the glory of martyrdom, when thousands of brothers fell to their sacrifice, for our Faith; and then I had a prophetic dream, which indicated to me this glory for a future existence[1]. Let me continue. Concentrating for a moment, he said:

- I see that you belong to me, that my words have touched your heart, and so I'll, by a sign, incorporate you into the communion of believers....

He took a jug that was there on a bench, while I knelt and took off my helmet.

- In the name of the heavenly Father, creator and lord of all the forces of body and soul, I open to you the fountain of Truth, so that you may continue proclaiming it to the disinherited of the Earth...

And so, speaking, he poured the jug over my head.

I felt a beneficial warmth, an indescribable well-being invading my whole body. I stood up, kissed his tunic, but at that moment I saw that he was pale and as if he was vacillating.

- The spirit is strong, but the flesh is weak - he said, trying to sit up and smiling sadly - nevertheless, I want to say a few words of teaching to the last of my disciples. My mission was to remind mankind that the well-being of the body must be subordinated to the happiness of the spirit. Earthly life is only a stage on the path to perfection. Therefore, don't conceive of this bodily life as anything other than the benefits you make; forgive your enemies, for hatred can only bind you to them more; and always pray fervently, for prayer will unite you to the divinity and make you forget worldly miseries, clearing your spirit and strengthening it so that you can repay evil with good.

Those who now condemn me and against whom you rebel in the depths of your heart, do so because they don't understand me; and

the priests only hate me because I censure their abuses, without wanting to recognize that my teaching could only soften their hearts and fill and dignify their temples.

This situation will endure for centuries and centuries to come... (His gaze seemed to soak in distant pictures). The seed I've sown will germinate in struggles, through which some will progress, and others will fail. Yes, millions of men will become my children, sheep of my flock, but also, how much cruelty and how many massacres will take place in my name! How much blood will flow in the name of one who proclaims equality in the face of the Eternal, whose love extends to all creatures! The very ones who now disown me will proclaim me amidst martyrdom, and the time will come when my words must be adulterated, repulsed, and forgotten by many peoples, whose faith will waver. It will be then, when I'll send them the Spirit of Truth, and the curtain that bars the homeland of the soul will be torn asunder: the dead will rise and speak to men by different means. There are still other things I would like to tell you, but your spirit isn't prepared to understand me.

- But doesn't the infamous death that awaits you intimidate you, Master? My heart fills up just imagining it.

The tears suffocated me.

- Shepherd of the whole flock, since the day of the creation of this world of atonement, it is up to me to enlighten it and seal with my own blood the truths that I preach. Such is the will of the Father.

A noise of voices in the corridor interrupted our interview. I hurried out and saw, to my surprise, a woman kneeling in supplication to the soldiers. She wasn't young, but her pale, agonized countenance revealed the vestiges of a beauty that should have been dazzling.

- Who is this woman and what does she want? - I asked, approaching.

- She is - answered a soldier - the mother of the condemned man, who asks permission to come in and talk to him.

Her eyes fixed me with such an expression of anguish that I got a chill.

- Justice - I told her gravely - has condemned the culprit, who will have only a few hours to live; but the law doesn't prevent the mother from seeing and saying goodbye to her son; only, so that she won't convey any suspicious message to the prisoner, I'll attend the interview. - And I invited her to follow me.

She staggered to her feet and entered the prison, where the Master remained seated, as if absorbed in fervent prayer. On seeing him,

the woman gave a muffled cry and began to weep copiously.

Jesus trembled and recognizing her, rose and opened His arms around her:

- Mother! my poor mother!

She rushed to him in convulsive sobs, and let her head hang down on his breast. He, in turn, gazed at her for a moment with unfailing love and sadness, then raised his brow and looked into her maternal eyes with a radiance such as never existed on earth:

- Mother, how did you do it?... I instructed you, I shared my knowledge with you, so that this hour would be less painful for you; you understood me, you believed me, and yet you weep and suffer in this decisive moment... You would say that death terrifies you when you know that our separation will only be momentary. Could it be that you've lost' your faith?

As if reassured, the woman stood up and took the Master's hand and kissed it:

- No, son: I'll confess myself; I want to show myself worthy of the son I have, I'll follow you to the end.

As she spoke, she wiped her eyes, turned to me and said with gentleness and firmness:

- Will you allow me, Centurion, to accompany you to the place of torture? The plebs have, believe me, that right. Don't let your soldiers push me away from the cross, because I want to console him in these cruel moments.

- I agree - I replied, moved - and what I regret is that I can do nothing more on your behalf.

Finally, the time had come for me to fulfill my duty, which had never been so painful: as the procession was marching, I noticed that the Lord's mother followed us, staggering, held by one of the disciples? When we arrived at Calvary, I gave the necessary orders, but, while the hammers groaned, I looked away, because those mournful blows were piercing my heart. Suddenly, I looked up and saw that the cross had just been put in position! It was then that, as it crossed mine, the Master's deep gaze seemed to say to me: - "This is how we must die!"

The following hours were quite painful; the heat was simply suffocating, and the mob gathered around the tortured men, seized by a strange exaltation; there was shouting, altercation, and often the soldiers had to intervene with a muzzle to maintain order.

Around eighteen o'clock, the sky was covered with black clouds and a distant thunderclap shook the ground. I lifted my head and had the impression that I had demented: it seemed to me that the

dark heavenly vault was tearing open to let out from its bulge thousands of winged beings, emitting a golden light? In compact masses, they precipitated themselves, surrounded the wood, which, in its turn, illuminated with multicolored rays, was like a resplendent sun... In that ocean of light, surrounded by immaterial beings contemplating him radiant and full of love, the Master appeared to me no longer as the crucified martyr, but as the divinized being, luminous himself and with his eyes fixed on heaven, in the beatitude of eternity and glory.

Trembling, astonished, I looked around me and saw the Master's mother kneeling, arms outstretched to the cross. I thought, from the static attitude that transfigured her countenance, that I had seen the same vision.

When I turned around again, the luminous picture had completely disappeared, the sky was still black, streaked with lightning, and the thunder was repeated, shaking earth and sky. The crowd, terrified by the darkness and the violence of the storm, stampeded screaming, and I didn't rest until the torrential rain had washed away the atmosphere.

*

* *

Cáius, who until then had been eagerly drinking in the words of the hermit, exclaimed:

- Don't grieve, my friend, my paternal friend, for I too already share your veneration for this extraordinary man; but tell me one thing: where had Jesus, from so humble an origin, acquired the great knowledge and sublime eloquence with which he dominated hearts?

- His divine origin was manifested in the cradle, precisely by a wisdom that surpassed his age, and that in all the stages of his life. However, here is what I heard about it: After that conversation with the Master, I had the opportunity, through one of the disciples, to talk to a rich Jew and ardent adherent of the new doctrine, about the same question you're asking me now.

Well, this man told how the Master, when still a child, came to Jerusalem at the Passover, and having, by chance, intruded among the teachers, surprised them all by his dissertations and reasoning, inconceivable at his age. Among these doctors was an old rabbi from Alexandria, a wealthy and wise man, who took an interest in the precocious boy and later provided him with a trip to that city for education. The old man's death prevented him from giving Jesus an

independent position, but he nevertheless traveled in India and didn't return to Galilee[2] until two or three years before he began his preaching. Since he was otherwise very discreet, none of his disciples knew the details of his life during this period away from their homeland. His mother could not have been unaware of it, but the truth is that she also remained silent about it. Now, that's enough for today, because I can see that you're tired and need to rest.

Cáius humbly obeyed, and after having hugged and thanked the good old man, he lay down exhausted by fatigue and emotion. Nevertheless, it had been a long time since his spirit had felt so peaceful, and soon a restful sleep closed his eyelids.

The following days were spent in long talks, and the young man never missed an opportunity to enlighten himself in the smallest detail on the subject that he was deeply passionate about. And that desire seemed to react favorably on his morbid state.

One afternoon, finding themselves inside the cave, they heard the voice of someone asking for permission:

- Oh! from home! can you tell if a month or so ago a man...

- Rutuba! - exclaimed Cáius, rushing towards the cave's entrance. - Is that you, my faithful friend?

- At last, my lord! I'd given up hope of ever seeing you again - he answered happily, while Cáius squeezed him in his arms.

Suddenly, however, he turned pale and dropped himself on a rock as a stool, asking in a changed voice:

- And Grandma? and my father? where are they? are they alive?

- The noble Fábia is well; your father, your brother and Drusilla are safe.

Calm down and listen to what happened.

The Anchorite's appearance briefly suspended the interview. After congratulating him on the good news, the old man said he needed to help a sick zealot and left the two alone.

- Speak up, Rutuba, before I get impatient: where are daddy and grandma?

- When we parted, we went down to the plain, and there, finally, we found a village where I was able to orient myself and give the matron her first care. When she came to, her state of weakness was such that she was unable to articulate a word or give her orders.

So, I had to act on my own and concluded that the most convenient thing was to take her to your father's estate, besides Capua, which was also the nearest. As the horses gave nothing more, I arranged for a litter, and, after having installed the noble lady in your house, making sure that nothing was missing, I rushed here with all

haste. However, all that was found was the remains of "Hurricane"! Of you, not a shadow, not a trace... Then, I remembered your last words and assumed that you had gone on to Rome. I hurried there, but in the house of Drúsus, nobody knew about you or anything else.

At the height of the tribulation, not knowing what to do, I remembered that, on the fateful day of the eruption, Semprônius was to visit the galley of Hatérius Rúfus, on his way to Rome. Hatérius, therefore, if he were alive, would be the only person who could guide my steps. I tried to find out and the quaestor was kind enough to receive me, despite the distress in which his own family found themselves, for I must tell you that two of Pompônia's children, her brother-in-law and sister-in-law, as well as other relatives not on board, must have perished fatally. Haterius informed me that your father, your brother and Drusila, Agripa and his wife, as well as the noble Virgília were fortunately able to reach their galley. And because they all wished it, he transported them to Agripa's farm near Naples, where they are still. The despair of your father, presuming you dead, is simply indescribable and perhaps only comparable to that of Virgília, who lost her husband and son in the catastrophe.

- Poor father, unfortunate Virgília! I wish I could fly to be at your side right now...

And immediately, from her eyes, thus debating, tears burst forth. Rutuba continued:

- I've little more to say. With this information, I returned to Fábia. The news that Semprônius was safe seemed to have comforted her, and she soon wrote to Metela to tell her what she knew, but also to ask her not to tell Semprônius anything, so as not to deceive him with doubtful hopes. Metela didn't delay her answer, inviting her to go there immediately, which she did, but not without reminding me of the need to always look for you. I left immediately, and, finding nothing, was already discouraged when a peasant appeared to me and informed me that an old resident of this mountain had taken in a beautiful sick boy, whom he was caring for with the greatest care.

- I can never repay your dedication, my Rutuba. And now, first, we must take care of the departure, because I don't want to prolong the anguish of my poor relatives for a minute. Would it be possible to arrange a litter in these parts? I say so because I still feel weak to ride. Another thing: do you have money?

- Don't worry about, it because your grandmother gave me enough. In that case, allow me to leave now, with the assurance that I'll be back here tomorrow, with the litter.

When the hermit returned, the young patrician told him

everything that had happened.

- I must leave, Father João, and despite my desire to receive baptism from your hands, I don't want to take such a serious decision without being authorized by my father and grandmother. You know how much I love them and therefore, I also want to be sure that they approve of my purpose at the solemn moment when I should unite with the Divine Master that you've revealed to me.

- Well, go, son, and be assured that to obey_ and honor father and mother is the primary duty of every Christian. Prepare yourself, therefore, for the great act of your baptism, by practicing the Lord's precepts. Try to master your passions and do all the good you can.

- Your speech relieves my heart of the last weight it had left - said Cáius, squeezing the old man's hand - and now I'm asking you, come with me and let's say a prayer there, where I heard the truth and think I've found health in body and soul.

- With pleasure, son.

They went to the shrine, where they knelt and prayed fervently.

This done, the hermit put his hand on the head of the young patrician, and, eyes fixed on the image, said with all the unction:

- I bless you, son; it wasn't in vain that Providence brought you here and allowed me to touch your ardent but loyal heart; love the truth, as faithfully as you love your parents, and the blessing of heaven will follow you everywhere, always. In the desert sands, it will make the grass sprout, and make the lymph gush out of the rock, and quench your thirst. You'll return here, accompanied by your father, but not so soon as you suppose; both will receive baptism from my hands. I can see that, and I see something else, but I must be quiet.

Deeply moved, Cáius stood up and osculated the supersede of the cross.

"- Divine and merciful Master - he murmured - my heart belongs to you!"

As he descended the two rustic steps, he clasped the old man in a long, narrow embrace.

- Thank you very much, Father João, for all you've done for me: I'm leaving happy, relieved, and hopeful too, because you said I'll come back. It's up to me to do it as soon as possible, and as soon as an opportunity presents itself, I'll confess everything to my father.

II

Grieving Hearts

By the sea, between Naples and Pusoles, stood the vast and magnificent villa of Fabrícius Agripa, where his family and friends who had been spared the destruction of Herculaneum had taken refuge.

In a richly furnished room, whose windows offered an admirable view of the gulf, which was always crisscrossed with ships, we find Metela giving orders to the slave master for his daily task. So much so that she was alone, she leaned against the gilded bronze table and allowed herself to be absorbed in the splendid panorama before her.

Disfigured and emaciated, one could see that those last thirty days had been very hard on her, not so much for her own sake, since the gods had spared her the most precious treasures - husband and children - but because of the despair of her friends and the immediate care of Virgília, who had been seriously ill since the day they arrived there.

A lady of calm and energetic temperament, she looked at human existence through a rational prism, understanding the need to conform to the inescapable, and that enslaving someone to a perennial pain would only aggravate the situation, compromising the health of both body and spirit.

And that is why, without ceasing to share his friends' misfortunes, he tried, always, to instill resignation and courage in them.

Giving a slight sigh, she got up and went in search of those she now called her dearest precious, since she had a pleasant surprise for one of them and had decided to have a serious talk with another.

Lest and graceful, she went first to the colonnaded galleries overlooking the garden, where the old Semprônius strolled from one side to the other, always hunched over, with his hands folded behind his back.

The austere patrician didn't look like the same man! His tall bust was curved, his hair was completely thinning, and the contraction of his lips was a typical symptom of the deep grief that undermined him.

Stopping at the entrance, the girl gazed at him sadly; then, coming closer, she took his arm:

- Good friend, let's sit down for a moment: I can't allow you to languish here like this, even more so because I've come to tell you something hopeful for all of us.

- What is it, Metela? I know that your great heart is looking for a thousand pretexts to comfort us; but what can I've left but the

certainty of an insurmountable misfortune?

- Then, listen, before you attribute invention to me - she replied, smiling, drawing him to a marble bench. - One of our servants who was saved from the catastrophe, but who has only now managed to learn our whereabouts, has just arrived this morning and says that he thought he saw, on his way to Rome, the horse "Dafné", exhausted with fatigue, and, not far from the place, a piece of cloth that he believes to have belonged to Fábia. Since we have no positive proof of Cáius' death, it is admissible to assume that he fled to Rome, or that he fell ill on the way and remained in some village, unable to give news.

The faded face of the noble patrician became a glimmer of hope...

- You're right, Metela, all this is possible... Oh, my poor son! If I could get you back, it would be a new life for me... But where is this servant? I'd like to see him, to speak to him myself.

- Nothing more than that I could tell you, other than that it is currently absent. You could, nevertheless.

You can see him and speak to him as soon as he returns. Now, take my advice: Try to arrange with Agripa to choose a trustworthy man to go to Drúsus' house in Rome. Since Cáius isn't there, this man should knock all the way. For my part, I have a feeling that the gods still have great joy in store for you, and you know that my feelings are always worth something.

- May they be as sure in joy as in misfortune! I accept your advice, for you're always wise, how kind, and brave. But tell me, how did Virgília pass - our pretty little flower, despoiled in the gale's blow. The poor thing doesn't even look like the same creature to me...

- She is doing much better, so much so that today I want to see if she will attend our meal. However, her lukewarm apathy and that deep abstraction don't cease to alarm me. It's true - she added sighing - that to lose at one stroke an only son and a husband like Márcus Fábius is beyond human strength.

- But you forget that the poor girl also lost her entire fortune under the rubble, and the moment we are all living through is one of the most critical, economically speaking.

- That would be the least of it, because both Agripa and I esteem Virgília as a sister, and we have educated her since she was eight years old, which gives us the right to protect her and assure her a future.

- But your fortune has also suffered a great loss, and you must not forget that you have two children.

- I don't dispute, you see, your right of guardianship and domestic

asylum, but I hope that neither you nor your husband will mind if I try to assure Virgília of her independence, since she has also become dear to me as if she were a daughter... You see, Cáius loved her, and she was the first person who wept with me for her loss.

- I believe that Virgília will never refuse the gratitude of a paternal friend like you, but in any case, I need to keep her in my company, since no one knows her like I do and can react on her spirit. As for what you say about our fortune, it is true that we have experienced enormous loss, but we still have enough left to maintain a lavish and luxurious life. For the rest, through well understood savings and careful guidance, it is always possible to repair all the breaches of fortune. That's exactly what I usually say to Agripa, when, after calculations on calculations, he comes to me with the attitude of a defeated Harpagão... He said jokingly and added:

- Now, I'm off to see our sick woman.

- And I'll think of the best way to take your advice, sending not one, but three or four scouts on the trail of my Cáius as soon as possible.

- I'm glad to see the Semprônius I knew twenty years ago, impatient, resolute, always active. See you later at dinner.

Satisfied with the results of the interview, she went to the other end of the house, where Drusila's room was, because it was with her that Metela wanted to talk seriously. The small room, as well as the alcove, were deserted. He slowly lifted the heavy curtain and stopped at the entrance to the small study, all flowered and overlooking the gulf.

By the half-opened window, Drusila was sitting in a large wicker chair, with a small table at her side laden with silk balls and gold threads, and on her knees a vestment that overlooked the temple of Vesta. However, she wasn't working at the moment: rather, with her head resting on the back of the chair, she seemed to weep discreetly and completely absorbed in her immense pain.

The patrician gazed at her for a moment and then, coming closer, she picked up the embroidery, pretending to examine it.

- It won't be so soon that you'll be able to take this offering to the feet of the goddess, and these little spots aren't going to go down well with her. Come on, give me a hug and let's talk. It's not fair to mourn all your life like this, and sometimes it's even better to look deep into your heart.

The girl shuddered and stood up:

- No one, I think, can blame me for weeping over such a tragic loss of the best of parents....

- May the gods spare me from expressing such legitimate affection to you - she answered, reaching for a chair at the table - but you must remember the poor health and the sad life your father led. How many, many times did he tell me that his illness and blindness made his life an unbearable burden? Well, in this case, death is a liberation. Besides, he was no longer young, and we must consider that the catastrophe not only destroyed many blossoming lives, but also wounded other families even more rudely. Remember, for example, our Virgília, who lost her husband, her son, her fortune...

Resign yourself, then, to the will of the gods and seek, in prayer and in work, the necessary calmness of spirit so that you can honor your father's memory with good deeds.

- But I can't...

And soon the tears bubbled up in her eyes, more copious.

- At least for now, I can't think of anything else...

Metela frowned and lit a brighter light in her dark eyes.

- For I know that you think a lot about someone, whose name I don't wish to pronounce at this moment; but, consider the duty I have to speak to you with the utmost frankness: it isn't for Drúsus that you weep, although you sincerely regret his loss; these unbearable tears belong to Cáius Lucílius, and I don't think it's worthy of you to try to justify them with the name of your father.

I've long understood you, dear Drusila, and have only kept silent out of respect for your misfortune: now, however, the time has come to appeal to your feminine pride and dignity. How can you deplore the death of a man who never paid any attention to you? Besides, he's a married man, and if he's still alive, he may also have saved Dafné... Answer me for who you're, Drusila; erase from your memory the dark eyes of your cousin and seek, in an honorable marriage, the tranquility of your spirit: - a home and children will eventually drive away those harmful fancies and you'll be happy. If you dislike the party of Nero, or of Cláudius, nothing prevents you from choosing another.

Trembling and flushed to the roots of her hair, the girl had heard those words, the truth of which she could not refuse, and suddenly she covered her face with her hands and burst into sobs. Metela squeezed her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

- Forgive my words of severity and frankness because I only said them to warn you about yourself. Later, when you're calmer, you'll agree with me that if, in fact, your inclination for Cáius was a legitimate thing, you would not need to cover up your despair at the loss of your father. Think about it, dear, and draw strength from your own

dignity. And now, allow me to go to Virgília, for I want, depending on the state I find her in, to invite her to come to our repast.

- Thank you! I'll try to follow your advice. They said goodbye.

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* *

In the vast and magnificent garden surrounding the manor house, there was a little forest, which was the owner's favorite because of the artificial rock shelter it offered to the scorching sun. Surrounded by luxuriant plants, there one enjoyed the attraction of silence, broken only by the soft murmur of a crystalline, living fountain gushing from a rock.

In this poetic refuge, which one might say was imagined for rest and daydreaming, a bed furnished with soft cushions had been placed that day, and on it lay Virgília with her eyes closed, as if asleep, while a little black woman with a feather duster repelled the flying insects.

How changed was the "golden butterfly"! Her oval, rosy, mignon face had thinned, softened with wax; her mouth had retracted in a rictus of indefinable sorrow; everything about her indicated, in short, that the catastrophe, robbing her of her husband and son, had reacted in her delicate physique in an irremediable way. She was like a mimosa plant transplanted in the middle of winter, incapable of reblooming to life.

Stopping at the entrance to the woods, Metela stared at her as if in a lively gaze, and, with misty eyes, approached her cautiously and gave her a light kiss on her pale lips. Virgília opened her big lucid eyes and, recognizing her friend, stood up and rested her head on her shoulder blades.

- I dreamed about Fábius... - And immediately her eyes moistened.

The other hugged her tenderly:

- Don't cry like that. If Márcus Fábius can see how you harm and compromise his health and life, he'll suffer a lot from it. Why burden his spirit with such despair and grieve those who watch over and love you? Such a noble and good creature can only be happy in the mansion of eternal rest that the immortal gods reserve for virtuous souls. Try, rather, to remember him with love, yes, but without regretting his fate, and try to live for our friendship.

Remember your wedding day, when, as I was tightening the purple veil, I said: "Fly, my golden butterfly" - and you embraced me and

answered: - "I'll always love you, as much as I loved Márcus Fábius...". For now, the time has come for you to prove that such words were not in vain. Or is it that you no longer love me?

- That's not a question you should ask me, Metela... Nor can you doubt that, after Cáius, you're the creature I cherish most in this world. You must agree, however, that to lose everything at the same time is too hard an ordeal.

She sobbed... Tears choked her voice. Metela tried to wipe away those affectionate tears:

- Well then: for my sake, calm down; try to look at your two years of conjugal bliss as if they were a beautiful dream shattered at dawn. Live for us, help me in the management of the house, in the education of the children, as if you were a sister. And now, no more tears for today. Our friend Semprônius is getting a nice surprise today and I wanted you to be present at our meal.

- Really? Will there be news from Cáius?

- The thing is under wraps. A few days ago, I received a letter from Fábia, in which she tells me that it was the one who saved her, but he had to stop on the way, exhausted by fatigue, without being found later. Fábia asks for secrecy on the subject, so as not to increase her son's despair. She is coming to meet us, and it was to wait for her that Agripa traveled at night. So, if, as I presume, Cáius Lucílius is alive, you still have two good friends left in the world.

- Good news, indeed, which I'm glad to hear from our dear Semprônius by accepting your invitation. But first, please note that I need to correct this attire.

Shortly afterwards, all the guests gathered in the tri-clinic for dinner. Semprônius, more animated, appeared accompanied by Nero, who had obtained a leave of absence. The latter, however, remained cold and reserved towards the old man, who could not forgive the tears shed for the loss of his brother. Another was the magnet that kept him in town - Virgília, to whom he never tired of showing affectionate attention. His passion for the young widow had grown, and since he saw that his father was less severe about him, he decided to come and ask him what he thought of a possible liaison with Virgília, in case he could win her heart.

Pleasantly surprised, Semprônius was more touched than usual and declared that the plan corresponded to his wishes, since no one deserved his affection more than Virgília.

The meal went quietly. Only Semprônius asked if Agripa had not returned.

- Traveling accidents, of course, but he shouldn't be long -

answered Metela, with the most innocent of smiles.

Then they all went out onto the terrace, where they were serving fruit, sweets, wine. Nero helped Virgília to a couch, fluffed the cushions and, sitting down next to her, peeled an orange, forcing her to suck on it. The girl accepted these little cares, smiling sadly and sometimes thanking him with a handshake.

Cláudius was no less solicitous next to Drusila, for whom he deleted a long poem he had composed about the destruction of Herculaneum. Holding the parchment in his hands, the young man recited quietly, accentuating the pathetic scenes in which he had skillfully inserted the end of Drúsus, while at the same time giving her significant looks.

Suddenly Metela, who seemed to be watching every movement, got up and left, saying she was going to see if her husband had arrived. Soon, the clatter of children and then the clear voice of Agripa appearing in the gallery:

- Good morning, friends! Hail to you all! Semprônius, look what I've brought you.

The old patrician turned around and covered his eyes with his hands, as if dazzled... It was Fábia who, between Metela and her husband, was walking towards him:

- Son! my son... - she repeated, opening her arms to him.

- Mother, my mother... it's like a dream!

- You're right: only a favor from the gods could provide our old age with the fortune of this encounter, when so many youths have disappeared forever in the voracity of catastrophe.

Soon a sign of pain shaded Semprônius' face, but he controlled himself and led his mother to an armchair, while everyone approached her to greet and congratulate her.

As she embraced Nero, the venerable lady could see only the transparent face of Virgília, who was a little behind them all, leaning against the balcony.

- Poor little daughter, let me hug you, now that you're twice as dear to me - exclaimed Fábia, kissing her blond hair. And then adding - I already know that you lost everything on that fateful day... I would be dead myself if it weren't for my grandson's courage.

- So, it was Cáius who saved you? - interjected Semprônius, already exalted - Tell me, then, what you knew about him until the last moment... Oh, implacable gods, why should we survive the one who was the charm and the reason for our lives?

- What do you mean by this "last moments of my life" thing, oh, dear father? Well, I still intend to live a long time, to love you all very

much...

These words, well spoken, exploded in the hall like a bomb!

Everyone turned around, as if electrified, and found the slender figure of Cáius Lucíllius, who, pale and emaciated, but smiling, appeared at the entrance to the gallery, with Rutuba's unmoved face behind him.

Semprônius stood up, staggering with emotion.

- Cáius! My Cáius! Will the tomb return his prey to us?

The boy threw himself into his arms, and they remained silent and silent, savoring one of those unmixed joys that fate rarely grants to mortals. Then the young man embraced Fábia, who laughed and cried at the same time.

- Good little Granny, my dear father, be reassured, it is I who am here, safe and sound, and happy to find you all gathered here.

The general attention had been focused on this moving picture, and Cláudius was the only one to notice that Drusila had fainted as soon as he heard his cousin's voice.

He tried to help and support her with the greatest care, made her sniff an essence bottle, and when she came to her senses, it was him that her eyes saw.

And that was at the very moment when Cáius was enveloping all his friends around him in an affectionate gaze.

- How fortunate for me! Is it not that at a single stroke I find all those who are dear to me gathered?

He said it with such a joviality, as he embraced Nero, Cláudius, Drusila, Agripa... When it was Metela's turn, he took her hands, brought them to his chest and kissed her red lips.

- Today - he said - nobody has the right to refuse me a kiss, and if you can afford to be jealous, Agripa, then you're not my friend... He laughed.

- Come on, come on, but just for this once, because I hope we'll never meet again under the same conditions and circumstances.

- You, naughty boy - said Metela - if I could have foreseen that you would return with your futilely laden brains, I would always have spared the precious tears I shed in your memory. However, you now have the right to be proud of having been mourned by such beautiful eyes...

- But where is Virgília? Rutuba informed me that she had been saved.

- There she is - answered Metela, indicating the young woman who, in fact, had tried to escape the tumult, and retreated to the terrace with her eyes full of tears.

- So, Virgília, what's this all about? Are you running away from me like this, when I come back safe and sound?

She went to meet him and took both his hands. But at the sight of the change in the mousy creature's physique, he stopped short, impressed:

- I appreciate your grief, but am I not also a loved one of your heart?

What, so misfortune has extinguished the memory of our happy childhood?

- Don't say that, Cáius, don't be unfair; you know how much I love you and forget nothing, but the idea that none of the loved ones I've lost can ever rise again, which is to say - from my eternal isolation, oppresses my heart and makes my life indifferent.

- You'll never be isolated, if we live; your place is with us, already as the little sister of our childhood, already as the precious legacy of our dear and deceased Márcus Fábius.

He drew her in, embraced her, she couldn't resist and let her beautiful head hang on the boy's chest, until, overcome by so many emotions, she collapsed. Metela immediately came to her aid, startled:

- Come on, Cáius, hurry, let's get her to bed: it seemed to me that I was putting too much trust in her strength...

Cáius lifted the burden with caution, led the girl to her room, and there assisted Metela in the first aid.

- Poor creature - said Metela as she rubbed his temples - you've been seriously ill, and your condition is one that requires every care. Your return, as well as Fábia's, has moved her deeply. But, by the way, what news have you given me about Dafné? Who knows, maybe she was also saved and will reappear at any moment?

Cáius, who at that moment was leaning towards Virgília's pale face, felt a shock, stood up straight, and even more pale, murmured:

- If you esteem me, I beg you not to speak that name to me, never remind me that that woman existed.

And noticing the astonishment of the patrician, he added in a calmer voice:

- She is dead and quite dead, no one will ever be able to see her anywhere.

The noble lady understood that something extraordinary had happened, and, shaking his hand, she simply replied:

- Let us forget her and sin to the gods the forgiveness of her faults.

- Yes! yes! we have sinned for her - he fervently murmured.

At that moment, the girl stirred in her bed, widened her eyes and, with her arm outstretched as if pointing to an invisible object, murmured in a broken voice: "There, there, sitting there, squeezed between two tigers, here she is, staring at me with her terrible gaze! And it was you... Cáius..."

He collapsed on the pillows.

Livid, as if stunned, Cáius backed away and, turning suddenly, ran out.

- Sweetie, what's the matter with you? What tigers are you talking about? - asked Metela, leaning towards the girl who had just reopened her eyes.

Virgília ran her hand over her forehead and retorted in amazement:

- Tigers? I don't understand you. Could it be that I dreamed? But where and how did I fall asleep?

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The following days were days of joy and rest for all those who were miraculously saved. Semprônius was as if reborn and soon revealed himself in his energetic and dynamic temperament.

- Dear friends - he said one evening when they were all gathered on the seaside terrace - however pleasant and flattering Agripa's hospitality may be to us, I can't help but rebuild my home, and to do so I'll explain my plan to you: - I've, as you know, a large estate near "Mincenes," where my father's fancy has improvised a beautiful villa on a rock by the sea, just like this one, my Agripa. I haven't set foot there in about twenty years, and the house must be in a terrible state of disrepair, even though it has long served as a shelter for an old relative who had a blind daughter. But that isn't the point, and I'll be there in a few days to restore whatever is needed. Cáius is still in need of rest, so I'll go alone.

- Excellent idea, my son - said Fábia - and I remember visiting this house when good Calpúrnia died. There is really a wonderful panorama there, and there were beautiful gardens, although a bit neglected... I think we will be magnificently settled there.

- Since you agree, my mother, you'll try to get started as soon as possible and I hope to finish everything within a month, when I'll be here to take Cáius, Drusila and Virgília, unless Cláudius doesn't want to give us the pleasure of his company.

- It's clear that Semprônius is back to his old self. It's as if the world

is running away from his feet... However, as much as it pains me to see such expensive guests leave, I can't prevent them from making their home again. There is only one thing I object to, in a categorical vow, and that is to separate from Virgília, whom I raised, educated, and married, since she lost her parents and closest relatives.

Keeping her with us is now no more and no less than taking back our rights, and even more so when no one like us knows her. Sick as she is, only in the house that was her second paternal roof, she can and must treat herself... Isn't that right, my dear?

This is what Metela said.

- I'm staying with you and the children, although I'm deeply grateful for the proof of affection that Semprônius has just given me. In return, as soon as I can, I'll go and see them all - answered Virgília.

Agripa proposed, cup in hand:

- Once the departure is decided, the "golden butterfly" stays with us, and Drusila will help our venerable Fábia with household care.

Nero had been listening to the whole conversation, mute and grumbling, as always. His brother's unexpected resurrection had caused him the greatest disappointment, while the affectionate intimacy of Cáius' first contact with Virgília exacerbated his jealousy, sharpening passions barely quenched in his heart.

Metela's proposal had cheered him up a bit, and he had decided to wait until the removal of Cáius would increase his chances, because once she was comforted, young and beautiful Virgília would not want to be a widow.

He knew that the most dangerous rival was Cáius; but he also considered that the ostentatious love for Dafné would not fail to have an unfavorable influence on the concept of a proud woman like Virgília. This pride could perhaps induce her to reject the plebeian's legacy and opt for Semprônius' other son, who was... him.

Considering these hypotheses, she took a quiet moment, before her father left, to explain to him her plan to buy a large property not far from Agripa's, which was for sale precisely because its owner had died in Pompeii.

The old man willingly agreed and immediately made available the funds necessary for the immediate completion of the deal.

So, when Semprônius left for "Mincenes," life in the Agripa household went into a lull. Nero continued to court Virgília and Cláudius to worship Drusila. Only Cáius was considerably transformed. He was no longer the cheerful and reckless boy he used to be but was more discreet and thoughtful. He took long, solitary walks, remembered the old hermit, and thought of ways to convert his father to his new

belief. Otherwise, his best hours would be the ones he spent with his childhood friend, trying to distract and comfort her.

Shortly after his arrival, he had sent Rutuba to the hermit's cave, sending him a large sum of money, some amphorae of excellent wine, and a letter asking him to accept the gift for his poor, in the name of the one he now knew through her.

One morning, two weeks or so after her return, Rutuba hesitantly turned to Cáius and said to him, presenting the bill for the trip

- Look, boss, Apolônius' mother is here. I don't know how she heard that your father was here in Agripa's house and, gathering her last pennies, she came looking for any news of her son, still believing that he had escaped the cataclysm.

"I told him that the boy had probably died in Herculaneum, since he had not accompanied us to the Amphitheater, and I ended up giving him some money to return to Rome, since she was left in the most extreme poverty."

Cáius shuddered and lowered his head:

- Where is this woman?

- Nearby, in a hostel along the Naples Road.

- Let's go there. Take this cloak and wait for me at the exit gate.

Without noticing the servant's astonishment, Cáius went straight to Drusila's quarters and asked if the young cousin could receive him. Surprised and blushing, the girl soon appeared in the anteroom of her room.

- I've come to ask you a favor - she said, taking his hand affectionately.

- As far as I'm concerned, you're welcome in advance.

- I've heard that old Dóris, the guardian of your gardens, back in Rome, has just died, and I wish you to put in her place the mother of the sculptor Apolônius, who has been left in extreme poverty.

- Not only do I gladly agree, but I'll have this woman's little house refurbished and will give her everything else she needs.

Very pleased, the young man thanked me and went to meet Rutuba. On the way, Rutuba started talking:

- Scoundrel! Why did he need to betray someone who generously welcomed him? If he were good, he would still be alive.

Realizing that his curses had no answer, he fell silent. Quietly they went on, and reached a hostel, outside of which a dirty and disheveled woman was beating a boy with blows because he had broken a bowl of soup, the remains of which were scattered on the ground.

At the sight of the patrician, she let go of the small man, and, with a little mesmerizing, led the illustrious visitor into a small corridor at

the entrance of which was an old woman crouched with her face between her hands. Her clothes were poor and worn, and from under a woolen cloth a few locks of white hair hung from her head.

- Are you the mother of the sculptor Apolônius? - asked Cáius, touching her on the back.

She shuddered and raised her red eyes to him, already weeping:

- Yes, my lord, and I was left in the greatest penury, not only myself, but two children whom I left in Rome. Apolônius was our only support, our providence, and the merciless gods took him away from us and destroyed our life as well.

- Don't cry, don't curse like this, for neither you nor your children will die of hunger. I'll remain that providence that you've lost. Do you see this man? Well, he's my squire, and he's going to buy you some more suitable clothes and provide you with some money, as well as bring you a black woman to help you, since you're old and tired. In addition, you're now appointed warden of the gardens and orchards of my uncle Drúsus in Rome. This position entitles you to a small house where you can live peacefully until your children become men and can earn a living for themselves. You'll thus be assured an annual salary of one thousand sesterces.

The poor woman, who had heard everything, surprised, and moved, threw herself at his feet, kissed his toga and called him a benefactor; but, shying away from such signs, the young patrician hurried on his way home. His heart was filled with joy, and he conjectured that his old friend, the Anchorite, would also be pleased to see him practicing the precept of the Divine Master, who puts love and charity above nobility and fortune. He had just done good to those who had offended him, by trying to rescue from misery the mother of the scoundrel who had perished at his hands.

Filled with enthusiastic gratitude, he raised his eyes to heaven, where, in the words of the cenobite, Jesus had exalted Himself, and from his lips sprang a fervent prayer:

- Thank you, Lord, for having given me the opportunity to help this poor mother, whose son I sacrificed in my last blindness; and thank you also for having granted me the material goods that allow me to dry tears that would scald my heart.

Rutuba watched him in a daze, wondering whether the outbreak of the catastrophe and the violence of the events that followed might not have disturbed the young patrician's reason, for it seemed impossible to him to reward the relatives of the bandit, who in his opinion had sullied his honor, in this way.

From that day on, a more affectionate intimacy was established

between Cáius and Drusila. The good deed they had done together had brought them closer together. They spent many hours discussing the best way to educate and guide the poor woman's children.

Only one person didn't look favorably on the intimacy between the two cousins: Cláudius. The elegant parasite, as cordial as he was kind to everyone, was deafly and tenaciously plotting to marry Drusila, not because he loved her, but because he coveted her immense fortune.

This Cláudius was an example of the idle and depraved youth of Imperial Rome. To enjoy without working, to spend without counting, to court women, to gamble, this is what he aspired to. For the rest, he felt comfortable in Semprônius' house, where he had gained confidence and where he lacked nothing. Having lost nothing in Herculaneum, because he had nothing to lose, he took advantage of the temporary moral downfall of the old patrician, taking charge of the liquidation of some businesses to the detriment of the client, it is true, but also with profits for himself. Still, these were not enough resources for him. What he wanted was to take possession of Drúsus' opulent estate to indulge his unbridled passions without reserve.

To achieve this, he had to get rid of any suitor, especially Nero and Cáius, by skillfully stimulating their jealousy. In this game, Virgília seemed to him the best of weapons.

He admired and could even say he loved the blue-eyed "butterfly", and if Virgília were rich, he would certainly prefer her; but widowed and poor, he could never ask for her, and she was only of interest to him as a rivalry game between the two brothers.

Nero's assiduities with the girl were more than evident; she, however, mourned the loss of her husband so sincerely that she could refuse him, and in this case,

Nero could also revive the old family plan by turning to Drusilla. However, more dangerous to her seemed the unhoped-for approach of Cáius, of the latter.

Who, in fact, could guarantee that that fantastic gallant, now saturated with the savagery of Dafné, whose name he couldn't even pronounce, wouldn't let himself be taken in by that sweet creature, who, by the way, even seemed to guess his slightest desires in his eyes?

To remove such doubts, he decided to probe the heart of Cáius, and one day when they were alone, he said with simulated nonchalance:

- Who, even a few months ago, would have been able to suppose that Nero could be the successor of Márcus Fabius! And yet, it is more than probable, for your brother's intentions don't hide his intentions, and Virgília can't refuse him, since she is reduced to

poverty, and it is always hard to live on the backs of friends.

Now, what is beyond doubt is that the poor girl will never be happy, marrying such a suspicious and impulsive boy, after having enjoyed the calm, deep and thoughtful love of Fábius.

Hearing these thoughts, Cáius stood up, blushing:

- I doubt that Virgília will accept Nero as her husband, just as I doubt that the financial criterion can influence her resolutions to the point of marrying a man who doesn't speak to her heart. On the other hand, Virgília isn't unaware that my father, as well as I, esteem her as a member of the family and are willing to ensure her independence. Otherwise, I'll be frank with you and tell you that once she has recovered from her legitimate grief and her health, I hope to marry her. Old childhood comrades, both tried and tested in life, we will no longer delude ourselves with the nonsense that gave rise to our dissent in the past. She recognizes the sincere affection I've for her, and I don't think she'll hold me back, no matter who or how.

Closely satisfied, Cláudius shook her hand. On this side, he was at ease, no embargo on his projects. As for Nero, let him continue as he saw fit, Ja was no shadow of his own.

A few days after this interview, Semprônius returned home satisfied: the restoration of the farm was almost complete, and in a few more days he was able to take the whole family back to their new home, plus Drusila and Cláudius.

III

Fifteen months later

Not far from the "Mincenes" cape, on a high promontory, stood a tall villain, whose white colonnades loomed through the thick forest that surrounded it.

A winding alleyway lined with statues connected the manor house with a large terrace, which, artificially built on huge foundations, led into the sea, and opened, on all sides, the superb panorama of the gulf with its ridiculous beaches, the port of Mincenes, and, further away, the dark silhouette of Vesuvius, whose smoky top dominated the picture like a sinister memento mori.

One spring afternoon, a beautiful girl with a fresh complexion and childish countenance was leaning against a marble bench on the terrace. Her tight white dress showed the lines of her slender and supple body, while the rays of the setting sun played with the edges of her violet cloak as well as her full-blonde hair.

Virgília, who was no other, had effectively regained her health: rosy cheeks, fresh lips, only a hint of melancholy and a slight crease at the corners of her mouth indicated a profound transfiguration of spirit.

He was very nervous now, because he impatiently tore at the bangs of his belt, and his face reflected the most varied emotions. It was, in fact, a serious interview he had had with Fábia, and the no less serious resolution of the same.

The venerable matron had not been able to fully cover herself from the terrible emotions she had experienced with the eruption of Vesuvius. It could be seen that she was wasting away day by day, that she was slowly dying, always beautiful, calm, resigned, just as she had shown herself throughout her life. Lately, however, her strength had fallen so much that her son and grandson, always surrounding her with the greatest care, were convinced that she was approaching an end, perhaps a sudden one. Days before we resumed our narrative, Metela and Virgília had received letters from Cáius inviting them to spend some time in Micenes, because their grandmother didn't want to die without seeing her old friends reunited once more.

They both left that very morning, and Agripa was to join them later.

Taking advantage of the commotion at the reception, Fábia left, taking Virgília with her. After having probed the young widow's heart, he said to her as he embraced her: "My good little friend, before I leave this world, I wish I could fix the fate of those I've loved most in

life. For the happiness of both of us, marry my Cáius. The sorrow that still haunts you'll fade away at the dawn of a new love and new duties. I fully understand that Márcus Fábius is irreplaceable in your heart, but it also seems to me that your childhood companion is the only person you can still love in this world. Semprônius already considers you as his daughter and this marriage can only bring him joy. As for me, I don't need to tell you how happy I'm to be able to attend this union, to bless it. Now go, think about what I tell you and resolve it in conscience."

Surprised and confused, the girl had run to take refuge on the deserted terrace, where she was now meditating. Certainly, she wasn't repulsed by the idea of marrying Cáius, and the affection she had for him since childhood could easily be changed into love. Cáius is much changed now - she thought - he's no longer that impatient and clumsy doudivanas of other times... Who can tell us that this transformation isn't a consequence of the loss of Dafné?

In fact, I've reason to suppose that he loved her more than he loved me, because when Semprônius blocked the marriage, he was saddened and wasted away, while when I refused, he didn't go beyond a slight tiff, only to scandalize the whole city with his extravagances... Who will say that he can give me a unique, singular, exclusive love like that of Márcus?

One thing I can't understand, however, is that having loved your Dafné so much, you don't even pronounce her name... Why don't you have a sentence about her, a word of nostalgia? I recognize that she had faults, yes, but I also think that death should extinguish everything, even if they are repulsive beings, like that Gundicar, who caused me so much trouble and for whom I had the only marital disagreement. Now, thinking about the horrible death of that boy, I feel sorry for him...

A few strong and quick steps, resounding on the marble sidewalk, stopped his thoughts. Seeing Cáius Lucílius, she stood up and blushed. He approached her with ease and sat down beside her.

- Dear Virgília, I know that Grandma has already talked to you - he said, kissing her hand. - Will you have the courage to repel me for the second time when I offer you my hand as a husband?

She raised her eyes and met his velvet gaze, fascinating, dominating souls and hearts.

- Cáius, my friend, it vexes me to have to betray the memory of Fábius, and yet you're the only man to whom I would wish to belong; I love you; I've always loved you, not enough perhaps, but you're too beautiful and kind to captivate a woman's heart. There's another

consideration that puzzles me; it's this: if we marry, your heart can belong only to me, and then I ask you: can you give me the exclusive and tender love that Dafné inspired in you? Then is it not longing that makes you so sad and dreamy? And why don't you talk about her, don't shed a tear in her memory?

Hearing Dafné's name being pronounced, a sudden pallor came over the boy's cheeks.

However, he mastered the unforeseen emotion and spoke:

- You're right, between us there should be no secrets, and I'll tell you the end that Dafné had even if I risk being repelled by you with horror.

And, lowering his voice, he made a quick sketch of the terrible episodes that unfolded in Herculaneum. Virgília listened to him anxiously, palpitating, and now understood the glacial silence, the repugnance that stifled any expression of regret about the fate of the infidel woman, whom he, in his implacable decision, had condemned to death. And the insult to his heart and honor had transformed the voluble and rapturous patrician into the melancholy and dreamy man.

It hurt him, now, to have provoked such poignant memories.

The livid look on Cáius' face, the trembling of his lips and the strange glint in his eyes, were revealing how much he had suffered. Nevertheless, the raw revenge of outraged honor didn't fail to excite Virgília's intrepid and vengeful spirit. Never had the young patrician seemed more worthy of being loved. Then, when she noticed that he was silent and staring into the void, as if absorbed in the past, a sudden shiver of jealousy came to her heart, but soon she precociously passed her hand over the boy's damp forehead and murmured:

- I'm yours, and I swear I'll make you forget how much you suffered for an unworthy creature.

That melodious voice, corroborated by a wet, caressing wetness, was water on the feast: the young Cáius, exulting with joy, embraced her with effusion.

- Beloved bride, I promise you that you'll never regret these moments.

- He kissed her. And he repeated - I'll love you so much, so much, that the very shadow of Márcus Fábius will congratulate himself for the homage paid to his most precious treasure.

Absorbed in their conversation, the young couple didn't notice Cláudius, who was walking along the terrace as if in search of someone, and who, seeing them, soon tried to disappear into the shade of the trees.

- Enjoy... - he murmured - Espousals in sight, and then with the "golden butterfly"... Happy Maganão, this Cáius! Beauty, fortune, love, the gods have given him everything. But it's not about him that I've to deal with, it's about myself... What a wonderful opportunity this presents to me. I'll try with you, Cláudius friend; and let's go and tell Drusila the good news, throw ourselves at her feet and offer her our... love. Scratched jealousy and self-love will be in our favor; and the prospect of gazing at the tenderness of the lovebirds will also weigh in the balance. Frankly: as a good friend, I think I'll arrive in time to free her from herself, I mean - from a painful and... insurmountable shock.

With a slight smile, he turned around and went quickly to the opposite side of the garden, where he soon found Drusila, who, bathed in the last rays of the sun, was slowly turning around a small lake, from whose center, in a spout, was spouting a silvery liquid column.

It was obvious that the young Drusila was pleased, for she smiled and looked at a bouquet of wildflowers, touching the petals with her delicate little fingers.

He stopped in the shade of a plane tree and looked at her with a half ironic, half scrutinizing gaze. That bouquet, he knew, had been brought to him by Cáius from his morning stroll through the fields. She had bragged about it, and Cáius had offered it to her in a gesture of gallantry.

- And yet - he thought to himself - this woman, scorned by the happy Adônis, is truly beautiful! Irreproachable forms, a superb complexion, and those black eyes, contrasting with her blond hair, give her a touch of unprecedented preciousness. So much the better for me and for her, dowry, and all...

Leaving the refuge, he ran to meet her, and, after some spur-of-the-mentment words, he brusquely blurted out:

- Dear Drusila, I don't want to miss the opportunity to speak to you alone, an opportunity that I've long sought. You know that I love you, that I've been your slave for two years, and although I've not bothered you with my passion, I remember that there was a time when you hoped for me.

- I've always considered you my friend, dear Cláudius; but why should you choose this very day to tell me of your love?

- Because - he answered slowly - the spectacle of other people's happiness awakens in our hearts a sort of envy and desire for happiness. You don't know that I've just come from contemplating Virgília in the arms of Cáius swearing to each other fidelity and reciprocal

love. This picture made me feel more bitterly the isolation of my heart and is what brought me to the presence of the woman I adore.

As if touched by an electric current, Drusila stopped and dropped the branch, at the same time bringing her hand to her heart.

Cláudius didn't notice this gesture, nor did he hear the muffled sigh that came from her chest, since he had bent down and was trying to gather the flowers scattered on the floor. As he presented the barely composed bouquet to her, his hands were also trembling, and what agitated him was certainly not the fear of losing the woman he loved to another, but the fear of having to renounce the pleasures that the dowry would provide.

The next minute was decisive for his future: the crowning or destruction of the skillful plan, long and tenaciously developed and executed.

Finally, calm, he took Drusila's frozen hand and said in a passionate tone:

- Tell me: can I also hope for a happy future, which you once promised me?

She gave him a disconsolate and compassionate look:

- If you think I can make you happy by my friendship alone, I'm sorry to belong to you, and I promise to be your faithful and devoted wife; but I would be unworthy of you and myself if I offered you more than friendship....

Cláudius dropped the flowers and held her in his arms.

- I love you anyway, I love you just as you're, even because friendship, from a heart like yours, is worth the love of another heart, and so let this kiss be the seal of our union...

- As you wish...

She let her head rest heavily on the young man's shoulder.

There was a brief silence. The musician, happy, was overwhelmed with contentment, the match was won, he had gained independence and fortune. On his spiritual retina a radiant mirage was drawn, the enjoyment of all the pleasures of life. He was, however, intelligent enough not to disdain the state of mind of his future wife, and soon, taking her by the hand, he kissed her and tried to lead her to the bottom of the garden. With the skill and subtlety of spirit that were peculiar to him, he began a conversation that, forcing answers from the girl, ended up distracting her and restoring the necessary calm.

When they entered the house, it was already late at night, and soon a slave appeared, saying that Semprônius summoned them to the terrace, where everyone was gathered.

The terrace, as well as the short corridor leading to it, were

brightly lit. All around, torches and lamps illuminated the group gathered on the balcony.

Fábia was reclining in her resting diva, among soft, rich cushions. Her noble countenance expressed an overflowing joy; in front of her were the bride and groom, while Semprônius, face open in smiles, was chatting with the Agripa couple.

Faced with this picture, Drusila stooped, shuddering, and couldn't help but notice the radiant smile of Cáius Lucillius, who, arm behind his rival's back, seemed to devour her in a gaze of fire. The strong pressure of Cláudius' hand drew her to herself, and soon Semprônius, who had divisible them, shouted joyfully

- Come here, you runaways, come see two grooms who are waiting for you to congratulate them....

- Friends - he said, raising his hands in salute - receive ours and give us your greetings, for I´m also pleased to present my fiancée? Drusila has just granted me her hand, and I hope that the noble Semprônius and you, illustrious Fábia, will not refuse us your blessing, since you´ve always honored me with your friendship.

He could not have chosen a better opportunity to make this request: the joy Semprônius and Fábia had in seeing their old dream of marrying Cáius to Virgília finally come truly made them indulgent and silenced considerations that, under other circumstances, could only weigh unfavorably.

So it was that, reaching out his hand, Semprônius finally embraced him and said:

- Be welcome, my nephew, and don't forget that by marrying an orphan, you become doubly responsible for her happiness.

Fábia, in turn, opened her arms around him and said:

- Be happy, my children, and may the gods bless you.

While these expansions were going on, the slaves had improvised a flowery table filled with fine delicacies on the terrace. When supper was announced, everyone sat down and enjoyed themselves, exchanging toasts and epigrams.

Emptying a superb cup of Samos, Agripa, with outstretched arm, said:

- Who would have thought, remembering the cataclysm that hijacked our roofs, that the gods would reserve for us moments of joy like this?

- Admit it, Agripa - Cláudius laughed - that the cellars you so wisely dug under your house, and which allowed you to retrieve so many precious things from there, as well as the million locked trades, have only contributed to your present joy. That's the one you didn't count

on!

- I don't deny it; however, it must be said that I owe Metela the privilege of invention. If only I had listened to her other advice instead of ridiculing them... Penance, Metela, and I drink to your good sense, another cup! And as for you, little bride and groom, take advantage of the lesson, and don't forget to heed the woman's feelings.

The chorus of laughter was then interrupted by little Valérius, who was running around the table, stuffing a beautiful domestic dog with pastries.

- Look - said the boy, staring - Nero wants to have dinner too. - Everyone turned around and saw the young officer enter, his face flushed in his haste to arrive. A dark cloud seemed to obscure Semprônius' eyes, and he immediately frowned. Only then had he remembered that Nero also wanted Virgília and had anticipated asking for her assent.

- Greetings everyone - said the young tribune - I've come directly from your house, Agripa, sent by the intendant... But... by Bacchus, what a beautiful feast you celebrate here! Whom should I congratulate?

I filled the goblet.

Agripa, who hadn't failed to notice the suspicious air of the owners of the house, hurried to answer.

- You're just in time to consecrate a double engagement, that is: your brothers to Virgília and Cláudius' to Drusila.

He hadn't even finished saying this, when the cup slipped out of Nero's hand and smashed on the tile. Pale, his gaze stopped, the young man stepped back and collapsed.

There was a general startle, and while the men took care to lift him up and lay him out on a diva, Metela leaned over to Virgília, white as the color of her dress, and whispered in her ear:

- You see my suspicions were not unfounded.... The poor boy is definitely out of luck.

An instant later, the tribune regained his senses, and Cáius Lucílius, who was leaning towards him solicitously, saw such a flash of hatred in his eyes that he soon turned away apprehensively.

- Forgive me, all of you, for this setback? - he said, getting up - it's all the effect of heat and fatigue... a simple dizziness, nothing more. I'll drink to the health and happiness of the bride and groom, and then you'll allow me to retire, for I suppose a few hours' sleep will restore me completely.

IV

Blood Wedding

The days that followed passed quickly and were absorbed with the preparations for the wedding feast, which included the two marriages, as had been decided. No one paid any attention to Nero, who, by the way, was apparently calm and resigned to the events. The truth, however, was that his state of mind had worsened and perverted as never before. All the bad feelings long repressed had reached saturation. A caress, however innocent, a look, however natural, that the bride and groom exchanged, were needles of jealousy that pricked her heart. And in his morbid vesania he began to cherish the idea that only the blood of that brother, which snatched everything from him in the world, could extinguish the fire that devoured him inwardly.

And so, he saw the appointed day approaching. Metela was only impressed by the extreme pallor of the young officer, as well as by the sinister expression that sometimes twitched his lips. That apparent calm ended up confusing her, while he tried to draw from his own hatred the hidden and adoring force, waiting for the right moment to execute the planned crime.

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Retreating to their quarters before the party ended, Cáius and Virgília huddled by a window overlooking the garden, enjoying the cool, crisp air of the silent night. A slight noise at the gallery door caught their attention, and it was with surprise that they saw Nero emerge from there, livid, with a blushing look in his eyes, his right hand hidden behind his back.

- What does this invasion mean? - questioned Cáius, tying his face.

Mute, Nero threw himself at him and stabbed him in the chest.

The boy gave a scream and rolled to the ground.

Virgília stood there for an instant as if petrified, but, realizing that the tribune was getting ready to second the blow, she ran and grabbed the Syrian dagger from a small table that Cáius had left there minutes before, when he had taken off his toga, and quickly, and as accurate as a tiger, she plunged it all the way into her brother-in-law's back.

He opened his arms, swayed, and fell on his stomach.

At the same instant, shrill screams broke out from the nearby

gallery. It was a slave girl who, having seen Nero enter the couple's quarters, had witnessed everything through the opening of a curtain. The spectacle of this double aggression brought her to the feast room, where she could barely reproduce the astonishing occurrence with stunned words.

In an instant, the scene of the tragedy was filled with people, even more afflicted, all the more terrified.

Contemplating Nero, Semprônius couldn't help but wager: - Fratricide! But after a moment of reconsideration, he covered his face with his hands and, overcome with remorse, leaned against the wall so as not to fall.

Metela rushed towards Virgília, who, standing like a statue, with her hands raised and her gaze still, gave the impression that she had gone mad. At first, she seemed deaf and insensitive to her friend's words and caresses; but eventually she recognized her, and soon collapsed in her arms.

- Agripa, come on, help me take her to our room, because it's not possible to leave the poor thing here...

The patrician took her in his arms and led her to the other corner of the house, where Metela undressed her and arranged her in the best way.

Many hours passed, before poor Virgília regained consciousness of the dark reality.

In the meantime, they had tried to help the wounded.

Agripa, who, as an old soldier, had some notions of surgery, administered the emergency bandages until the doctor arrived, a worthy and wise old man who declared that, although the wounds were serious, he didn't consider them mortal.

Even so, not being able to foresee further complications, he refrained from prognosticating.

It was written in the book of destiny that that night would be a fateful one for Semprônius' family.

The news of the assassination attempt and the precarious condition of the grandchildren had also affected the noble matron, who was plunged into a deep torpor that the doctor could hardly fight.

When she finally opened her eyes, no one could be fooled anymore - her agony was transparent.

- I know I'm going to die... - she said, as she squeezed the hand of Drusila, who was leaning towards her, her eyes streaming with tears. - Don't cry. The gods have granted me a very long life...

Then, turning to the doctor:

- Has Cáius Lucílius returned to you? I want to see him and bless

him for the last time. Doctor, please allow me to be taken there as soon as possible, for I feel that my minutes are numbered...

The old physician nodded, and as they prepared to take her to her grandson, the latter, who until then had remained in a deep torpor, suddenly opened his eyes, and said:

- Grandma is calling me... Oh! I see they're leading her here... But how? She's leaving us, yes... The noose of fire that holds her will break at any moment, and I can't hold her!

She bowed her head, groaning, and seemed not to see when the slaves deposited the old woman at her side.

She remained motionless for a moment on the pillows that held her, until she opened her eyes and gazed lovingly at everyone gathered there.

- Lift the window curtain... I feel like I'm short of air.

Agripa answered, and soon a fresh and fragrant wave invaded the room. At his grandmother's voice, the boy stretched and shuddered, and taking her frozen hand, said:

- You're leaving us, you're going to die, Grandma....

- Dear son, I'm going where we all have to go: I bless you... and you too, my Semprônius... But to the other, to the wretch, to the madman, convey my forgiveness, tell him that... I bless him too.

At this moment, the sun was rising on the horizon and flooding the room with golden reflections.

Faced with this picture, the matron's emaciated countenance was suddenly transfigured: a slight blush colored her cheeks, her dark eyes rejoiced, and her whole person was like a glimmer of her primitive beauty. Staring at the luminous star rising from the bosom of the waves, as if it were floating on them, he exclaimed:

- It is Rá who salutes me! Rejuvenated and triumphant, here he rises from the land of shadows... Oh yes, I remember everything!

She rose, only to fall back immediately... She was effectively dead.

While they were removing the corpse, Cáius Lucílius, exhausted by so many emotions, fell into a restless sleep, seized by a burning delirium, struggling as if he saw himself drowning in a swamp. He called for his soldiers, repelled the doctor, calling him a damned sorcerer who pretended to lose him and his subjects...

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Three days later, Fábia's funeral was sadly celebrated without any pomp. Only the family and Agripa and his wife attended and shed

sincere tears in memory of that noble and venerable creature. A warm gloom weighed on the whole house, the state of the wounded was still alarming, consuming themselves with high fever. Fearful, as much as discouraged, Semprônius wandered from one side to the other, from the bed of Cáius, where love attracted him, to the bed of Nero, where the voice of conscience led him.

The thought that "his" son had raised his criminal arm to his own brother was like hot iron burning his heart.

Drusila and Metela devoted themselves selflessly to assisting the wounded, lavishing on them that intelligent care that salaried hands never perform. On the other hand, Metela often tried to be near Virgília, whose health caused her indefinable fears. When she came to her senses from that long faint, the girl remained in a deep apathy, from which no one or anything could pull her. And in truth, Metela was right. With a delicate complexion, still barely recovered from the shock caused by the loss of her husband and son, it was even to be assumed that she would not resist this second blow.

There was one person in that house who alone remained indifferent to the painful events, which she followed with dull disdain: it was Cláudius, who's selfish and pleasure-hungry spirit longed for the moment to enter the Drúsus' manor as a lord. So much so that he often barely breathed a curse as he gazed upon the gallant galley tied up there at the wharf and which was to carry him to Rome.

The night after Fábia's funeral, he couldn't help himself and, taking advantage of a moment when his wife was trying to get some rest, he said to her:

- Dear Drusila, now that we have fulfilled our last duties towards the noble Fábia, it seems to me that it is our right to take care of our lives. Here, we are already dispensable, for I heard Metela promise Semprônius that neither she nor her husband would leave him until calm was restored by the convalescence of the wounded. As a result, Agripa has already given all the instructions to his intendant and I think, therefore, that there will be no problem in leaving tomorrow for Rome, where we have, as you well know, interests that call us and we can't neglect them.

At these words, the girl blushed and gave him a deep, scrutinizing look.

- I'm hurt to see how little affection you have for the hospitable house that has received you as a friend for two years now. How can you abandon Semprônius at a time when he needs comfort and devotion the most? Metela and Agripa leave their home, their interests, to stay here, and you want me to abandon my uncle and the

wounded? Absolutely not. But you can go, even because the imperative of business and the urge to rule as master seem to you to be a reasonable excuse. So go, because you won't be missed here either and, to avoid any bad comments, I'll tell you myself that it was I who advised you to leave.

He bit his lips, she understood his impatience to lord over the new domains, and gently threw in his face her vanity and ingratitude to those who for two years had been feeding and clothing him.

That boldness and pertinacity, in staying, aroused in Cláudius' spirit a deaf anger. He certainly didn't love Drusila, but it was no less certain that she was now his wife. How could he dare to show her predilection for someone else? Urged on by this brutal spite, he set aside the prudence he had maintained up to then, respecting her sensitivities, and bending down to her ear, he said brusquely:

- I understand... It pains you to leave Cáius wounded like this... Do you think I'm blind? You married me so that you could leave this house, but now that the mad passion is driving you to take care of its object, at least to dream that you deserve it, you can't hurry me. Well, I'll go, but I shouldn't do it without showing you that I'm not deluding myself about you.

Drusila stood up, pale, and her eyes, usually so sweet, so calm, fell on her husband, glowing with pride and disdain:

- Since you're so clairvoyant, most noble Cláudius, you have not lacked the knowledge of cause to, given the opportunity of the moment, conquer a fortune that would enable you to satisfy idle inclinations and pious enjoyments. Indolent, you've never sought honorable work in the administration of the State, preferring to parasitize at the mercy of flattery and songs. Go, then, you ungrateful unworthy, not of love, but of sympathy; go, as your wife's first butler, to play the role of the owner of the goods acquired at a vile price, that is - of vile intrigue.

She turned her back on him, without even looking at him.

The musician alone had a fit of rage, cursing the frivolity that had led him to offend his wife in such a way; but, reflecting - and rightly so - that the best thing was to give time to time, he tried to explain to Semprônius and Agripa the reasons that induced him to leave, and, at dawn, he sailed to Rome.

Poor Drusila! Orphaned from the cradle, she had had a melancholy childhood and youth at the side of her sick and blind father. Life had nothing but disappointments in store for her, and the last one was that brutal scene with her husband which took away all the hopes she could possibly still harbor. The best moments of her life were the

ones she spent with Cáius Lucílius, treating him with unparalleled devotion, since Virgília, despite having recovered, was so weak that the doctor didn't allow her to spend a few hours a day at her husband's bedside.

It was, therefore, Drusila who watched over her cousin, and the grateful smile and the affectionate handshake he offered her compensated her for the waking nights at his bedside. Nor did she have the right to harbor any sorrow for the boy, since he could never guess what feelings, he inspired in her. She sighed, imagining what it would be like when, after her recovery, she would have to leave that friendly roof to return to Rome, where she would be obliged to live with her selfish and hypocritical husband. It had undoubtedly been a malevolent aspiration that had decided her to give herself to Cláudius, and now there was no escaping the consequences of her imprudence.

Six weeks went by. The wounded were visibly improving. Semprônius no longer feared losing his iliums, but the memory of the abominable attempt tortured the old patrician cruelly, to inspire in him either aversion and anger, or pungent remorse. At such moments, he bitterly reproached himself for not having raised and educated all his children in common! Oh! how many misfortunes she would have avoided if they had grown up together, in the shadow of a paternal and equanimous love!

Never, then, would that vesicular jealousy, that hatred raging through crime have radiated in Nero's heart to dig a chasm that made it impossible for the two brothers to live together under the same roof, to which they had, in fact, equal rights.

One day, Semprônius settled down at the edge of the bed of Cáius, whom they had first transported to the garden terrace.

- What's the matter, father? - asked the boy after staring at him silently and at length. - Can't you confide in me the thoughts that have so overwhelmed you?

The question provoked irritation. Semprônius exploded in a torrent of curses against Nero, whose attitude had created an untenable position for him.

Seeing his father angered, and hearing his accusatory libel, Cáius immediately remembered the solitary man in the cave and the narrative concerning the Master, who had forgiven and interceded for his executioners. And then came an incoherent desire to confess to his father his new beliefs and perhaps get him to share them.

- Calm down, father - he said, squeezing her hand tightly - be indulgent, forgive Nero; remember that he's just a victim of

circumstances, and he will have suffered a lot before reaching the extreme he has reached... For my part, I don't bear him the least resentment, and I sincerely wish to be reconciled with him, for my soul is filled with a new doctrine which prescribes the forgiveness of offenses and commands us to do good to our enemies.

I've long wanted to confess my new faith to you, but I lacked the courage.

- What new faith are you talking to me about? - he asked in astonishment. - Your words are conceptual, the precepts are wise, but I doubt that men can practically execute them. Forgiving offenses isn't easy, and benefiting enemies is even harder. But tell me everything, everything, because I've noticed a profound transformation in your character not long ago.

- Your kindness in listening to me makes me very happy, because I really wanted to open my "heart" to you.

And then he formulated a summary of everything he had kept quiet until the day of his meeting with the hermit. With the eloquence that was innate to him and the persuasive force that sprang from his heart, he spoke of the excellency of the Christian faith, of the precepts of abnegation and charity preached by the divine messenger of the heavenly Father, of the precariousness of earthly life and the unmitigated beatitude reserved, in a mansion of light, for the faithful penitents and sufferers.

Looking back at the inexhaustible meekness of the prophet and his sublime death, the physiognomy of the young patrician seemed to have been animated by divine fire, and the same burning faith floated in his dark eyes that he had experienced in the cave, when he prostrated at the feet of the crucified Master who had redeemed him.

Confused, amazed, overwhelmed, Semprônius heard everything without objecting. Finally, he said:

- I see how deep your conviction is, and it leads me to believe that I was mistaken about the Christian faith. I too need to be relieved and want to beg forgiveness for my faults, so that the prophet Jesus may reserve a place for me in his kingdom of peace and love. So, as soon as circumstances permit, we will go to the cave of the solitary man.

- He foretold me that we would return there to receive baptism from his hands - exclaimed Cáius radiantly. - Oh, Jesus, great is your power, that power which I've experienced! And as for you, my father, you don't know how happy I'm that I now have nothing to hide from you.

Days after this interview, Metela and her husband were in their room, in a lively conversation. Agripa had returned from the city the day before, and was preparing to return there soon, taking his family and the two wounded men with him, now almost completely recovered. At that moment, he was referring to Semprônius:

- It's a situation really worthy of pity, fearful of keeping under the same roof these two sons with identical rights to their love, but of whom one has become almost a murderer of the other. And who can tell us that by staying here, he will not repeat the attempt? Oh, I know how much the old friend suffers when he can't say to Nero - go away, while at the same time recognizing the inconvenience of saying - stay.

- But we could take Nero with us - concluded Metela, who had listened thoughtfully to her husband. - Everyone knows that I've been his almost exclusive nurse, and no one will find it strange that I want to assist my patient until the end. It's a solution that removes Semprônius' impasse, and we need to demote the boy to accompany us.

- Excellent idea, and I'll get on with him right away - said Agripa, walking to the tribune's room.

The boy had gotten up, got dressed and was resting in a wicker armchair by the open window. His features were much changed, a wild and sinister look hung over his bald face, and his lips twitched in a rhythm of deep bitterness.

During her convalescence, a real moral storm had clouded her soul. The idea that Virgília, his beloved wife, had wounded him in defense of Cáius, had generated in his heart a whole mash of hate and inconceivable gall against his father and brother.

The slave had barely finished putting away his pillows when Agripa appeared in the room.

- Get out, Trula - he said to the slave, as he sat down next to the convalescent and took his hand, asking him how he had spent the night.

And as soon as the slave left, he said to him without preamble:

- I've come, my dear Nero, to talk to you about things that I know are painful, that is, about your stay in this house, where you've caused grief and great pain. Staying here, it's impossible not to see your brother, which I'm sure you can't take pleasure in; and so, I've come to propose that you come with us next week to our house, where Metela, your devoted nurse, will take care of you until you can return to Rome, completely recovered.

At the first words of the patrician, Nero changed color.

- Surely it was my father who gave you the message... He didn't have the courage to come and tell his useless son out loud: - Get out of my house! My dear father! How could he forgive me for raising my arm against the other, the favorite? He, who always gave me his gold as if he were giving alms; gold of humiliation, cold and hard as himself.

- You're wrong: your father is unaware of my suggestion, because he's still too weak to think of anything. However, let me tell you that you let yourself be dragged into an abominable act that nothing, absolutely nothing, could justify. This, of course, nobody comments on, for the sake of the poor old man, and we even made it known that you had already fallen ill and had been stricken with a bout of madness.

- You're obviously very charitable... - said the wounded man ironically - but, anyway, it doesn't matter; I'll go willingly, such is my desire to leave this house, where everything is becoming hateful to me. I ask only one thing of you: it is that, giving my father the grateful news, you tell him of my desire to have an interview with him without witnesses, before my departure. And since this will probably be our last interview, I hope you'll not refuse me.

V
Semprônius and his two sons

On the morning of the day set for the departure of Agripa and his family, Semprônius, already early and angry and frowning, wandered the terrace, waiting for the interview requested by Nero.

His first impression of his son's wish was anger, because his despotic temperament could not admit any other will but his own. He considered it an unforgivable audacity to thus impose upon him the examination of a matter that he foresaw as irritating as it was unpleasant. However, the insurmountable remorse and the precepts of charity that Cáius insinuated to him whenever they had the opportunity to talk ended up dominating that first impression. So, he went to Nero's room, though embarrassed.

The boy was sitting at a small table, hands on his head and so absorbed that he didn't notice his father's entrance. The father approached him, tapped him lightly on the shoulder, and said:

- You want to talk to me alone, I'm here to listen to you.

Nero shuddered, stood up, and a flash of hatred fused in his eyes.

- First of all, I must tell you that you're forever free of a son whose presence has always been painful to you; but at the same time I call down upon you the vengeance of the gods, like a cruel and unnatural father who drove his children from the home in order to love only one of them, only because Nature had most richly endowed him. Do you believe that I've ever forgotten the way you treated us, depriving us of affection and assistance, to deliver us to the care of a grumpy and mean old woman, who mistreated us, who humiliated us, repeating to us at every instant that we were rejected from the moment we were born?

"Twenty-four years have passed and I've never crossed the threshold of the house where I was born. If I went back there one day, it was because I hoped, despite everything, to win a place in that home, with a share of affection in my father's heart. How crazy I was! I soon became convinced that I was nothing more than a stranger there, tolerated, certainly, but whose future and happiness nobody was interested in. You, not even in the hour of misfortune did you call me to support you, to help you. You preferred to mix your tears with those of a stranger, rather than open your arms to your exiled son. You've reserved all your worship for this living statue, unnerved by everyone's flattery - Cáius, whom the ashes of Vesuvius have returned to you intact, in order to rob me of my happiness.

"Yes! because, first of all, it was only in consideration of him that you betrayed me. I was the first to confess to you my love for Virgília, and, nevertheless, it was to him that you ended up attaching her, because you can't conceive of something like the "domestic god" that doesn't come true right away.

"Well then: I've tried to put an end to this idolatry, to annihilate this insolent youngest, who has robbed me and my German brothers of their paternal love, and steals everyone's affection from me, whenever and wherever we come across each other.

"As I brandished the dagger, my arm didn't tremble, because I knew that that blow would equally strike your heart. Finally, I could forgive you everything but the loss of the beloved woman. And therefore, I leave cursing your memory. This is what I wanted to tell you before we parted once and for all."

Fatigued, he settled down and ran his hand over his sweat-streaked forehead.

- Are you finished? Or do you still have some insult to affront me with?

- That's what I had to say.

- Then, listen to me in turn and don't interrupt me. A few months ago, I would have considered myself lowered in my dignity, pretending to justify myself before an ungrateful and angry son. As I did with Semprônius, I would have simply excluded you from the family, because of your abominable attack, to hand you over to legal justice.

"Today I think differently: I regret you, and I just want to show you, through a real prism, certain "winds of my past. Your grandfather was a rude, severe, despotic man, whom not even my mother would disobey. If, despite this, I grew up with a certain freedom, it was because his high position in the army kept him constantly, and sometimes for a long time, away from our home.

"I was 22 years old when I fell in love with beautiful, rich, well-born Livia. My mother thought it would be a suitable match and agreed that we should keep quiet. We only awaited the soon return of your grandfather to fulfill that dream.

"He returned, affectionately, but bringing with him, and to our great surprise, a nice-looking young woman, who by the way didn't impress me, because I already loved another woman. On the evening of that inauspicious day, my father summoned me to his room, and with the concision and authoritarianism peculiar to him, he informed me that Júlia's father had died to save her life, and that in testimony of his gratitude for that act of self-denial, he had sworn to the old

brother-in-arms, *in articulo mortis*, to secure his daughter's future by marrying her to his first-born son. So, he brought Julia to us, ordering me to esteem her as my future wife from the very beginning. I retired succumbed and asked my mother for her intervention, which was useless, because your grandfather thought that the word given to a dying man was inviolable, and he would not allow a reply.

"For a year I fought against that iron temper; there were scenes between us that only Fábia 's intervention prevented from becoming criminal. That resistance led me, then, to appeal to Júlia's generosity, offering her half of my fortune to give up our union. What reasons would lead her to refuse the proposal? To this day I don't know... I do know, however, that from that moment on I began to hate the woman who stubbornly interfered in my life. Finally, surrendering to the tears and pleas of your grandmother, whose health was suffering from those conflicts, I agreed to the marriage. For what purpose? you might say. There is no need to tell you, to you, whom the loss of the beloved wife almost led to fratricide, and you should therefore understand and judge me with more indulgence.

"Our married life, begun under such auspices, could not have been a happy one, and the fierce jealousy, suspicions and spying with which your mother pursued me, eventually made it supremely detestable. Nevertheless, when Antony was born, I had a fatherly affection for him, which led me to believe that I would have devoted myself entirely to him if Julia had not prevented me from doing so. But when she saw that her scenes of jealousy and tears kept drawing me further and further away from her, she was quick to give vent to her malice, inspiring her children with such dislike for me that it was enough that they knew I was in the house to hide, without having the courage to look me in the face.

"Meanwhile, your grandfather died. In the meantime, your grandfather died, but disgusted with the domestic infernity, I applied for and obtained a judgeship, and began to live in the Forum or on constant trips, mostly unrelated to the family.

"Your birth almost cost your mother her life, and it can even be said that she no longer enjoyed health after giving birth. Yet she lived another three years, and more would certainly live, were it not for a cold recklessly acquired on the occasion of the festivities of the good goddess. Pneumonia took her away within a few days, leaving me freed from a nine-year captivity.

"I tried, then, to marry Lívia, who had remained faithful to our love. Perceiving that living together with you and your brothers was annoying to this woman whom the stubbornness and unscrupulousness

of your mother had condemned to the abandonment and sacrifice of the best phase of her youth, I resolved on the separation without imagining that one day I would regret my mistake.

"I've always had a double affection for Cáius, not for his beauty but for his loving nature, for the filial devotion he has always shown me, ever since he was born.

"Excessive tenderness was never in my nature; but I believe I've loyally fulfilled my duty as a father, assuring you and Antônius of a bright future.

"The wise and strict economy I've imposed on myself has allowed me to almost double my fortune, which, upon death, will be equally shared by the three, since Antônius, for his odious conduct, deserves to be disinherited. Cáius has only his mother's estate to spare.

"On the other hand, I've never tried to go against your wishes, and as soon as you intended to buy land adjacent to Agripa's, didn't I make the necessary funds available to you?

"The accusation that I betrayed you with regard to Virgília is simply ridiculous. I love this girl who, I may say, was born and raised under my watch, and I would like to see her married to any of my children.

"If she has passed you over for her childhood sweetheart, it isn't my fault, I had no part in the choice, and it is only my duty to deplore you, if indeed you have any love for her.

"The conjecture of how much you suffer and have suffered with the exile from home and my lack of affection; the harsh sentences you've just addressed to me, prove that your heart is deeply wounded. If we could go back in time to relive it, I assure you that my behavior would be different. But since this is impossible, let's at least try to repair what is possible by establishing peace between us.

"My days, I believe, are numbered: these latest events, the shock caused to me by the spectacle of two mortally wounded children, have profoundly altered my health. The hatred you harbor for Cáius and Virgília, and the bloody abyss you've dug between them and yourself, force you to leave... Well, I'm staying to die among them.

"Who can say that we still see each other in this world? So don't leave me with a heart full of gall and resentment, lest you regret it later. Let us embrace each other, poor exiled son, and accept my blessing from my heart!"

Semprônius' emotion and anger at the beginning of his speech were gradually extinguished; the metallic pitch of his voice had become melodious and soft, and when he opened his arms to his son, a furtive tear came back into his clear and usually cold eyes.

Nero stood up livid, confused, prey to the most dissimilar feelings.

The deep emotion, the tender gaze of that always austere father, had disarmed him. Giving in to a sudden inner impulse, he dropped to his knees and murmured in a hoarse, stuttering voice:

- Not for your heart, my father, for there is room in it for only one; but for myself, bless me to conjure up the curse I bear, always isolated, always unloved by all. I condemn you no longer, and let the gods judge the motives that led you to banish us from your heart... Mine, I confess to you, is a living wound!

Her voice died out in a convulsive sob.

Semprônius tied him to himself and kissed him mutely on the lips. It was the first time that a spontaneous and natural impulse had united these two souls.

- May the gods bless, help and protect you in all your steps - he said, placing his hand on his son's head - and now get some rest, for I fear that this emotion may aggravate your condition. Before you leave, we'll still see each other.

He hugged him once more and hurriedly left.

While this delicate interview was taking place, Virgília was in her husband's room. Although convalescent, the boy was lying down most of the time.

Now we found him, his wife was kneeling beside him, holding a glass of wine in one hand and a chicken thigh in the other, urging him to eat. He, in turn, was grumbling, joking, and trying to kiss her little fingers.

When the meal was over, he got up to go for his walk, and Virgília took his arm, as if to support his still unsteady steps. When they reached the garden, they walked slowly and talked about the imminent departure of Metela, as well as Semprônius' deep sadness, which worried them so much, when, at the bend of a narrow alley, they suddenly bumped into Nero. The two of them stopped at the same time and remained as if stuck to the ground. Virgília gave a muffled scream and drew closer to her husband.

They hadn't seen each other since the night of the assassination attempt because everything was done in the house to avoid a chance meeting. This was the first time the tribune had gone out alone, trying to calm the nervous excitement caused by the interview with his father.

White from the whiteness of his tunic, his lips trembling and his eyes ablaze with hatred, Nero stared at the couple, who appeared to him welded together like a block, as if mocking his powerlessness to separate or destroy them.

Cáius was the first to break the painful silence:

- Let us forget the past, Nero.... And immediately extending his hand to him:

- Forgive me the preference that Nature and friendship have awakened in me, be my brother by heart and see to restoring peace to our family; don't be so spiteful and so unjust, for it isn't my fault that you were banished from the paternal house. Believe me: I don't resent you for hurting me, since I didn't do well in marrying the woman you loved, but remember that Virgília only preferred me because I was her childhood sweetheart, because we grew up together, as if we were engaged in the cradle. However, I know that she loves you and only in an impulse of extreme exaltation, thinking I was dead, she dared to stab you. Let's make peace, therefore, if not for me, at least for our old father, whose health is deeply compromised by these facts. Think of the immense joy that our reconciliation would cause him.

Nero had listened silently, breathing with difficulty. The emotion he had felt at his father's interview had not yet calmed down. The invisible genie of good inspired him to accept a peace so generously offered, and to try to extinguish that hatred which brought him no benefit; but every time his gaze fell on the lovely creature that clung to his husband's arm - the "golden butterfly," jealousy and passion clenched his heart and stifled and repelled his good feelings.

When his brother finished, Nero's gaze had reacquired its characteristic hardness of expression, and it was in a mordant voice that he replied:

- I can only admire your generosity, since you want to forget and forgive my faults; however, I'm also surprised by the manifestation of these same feelings, so contrary to your impetuous and vengeful nature. Could it be that you find them in the presumption of your superiority? Yes, because fate has been unfair in *giving you* everything, only to *snatch everything* from me. It's true that I must resign myself to this, but I don't think I'm a beggar living on alms, or, in this case, on a favored friendship. I hate you, Cáius, for the talents that you possess and that at your feet drag any woman, and not only the one who has fallen in love with me. In fact, I also think it's natural that you desired her... For weren't you yourself the one who referred to her as a lovely creature, a "golden butterfly"? And is it perhaps your fault that she deceived me until the moment I flew to your side?

- You're lying! - replied to Virgília, her eyes already inflamed - I never gave you my trust, I never let you know that I loved you, much less that I believed in your love.

- No doubt, beautiful Virgília, you could not suspect my passion;

but, in this case, why did you tolerate my courtship, why did you smile at me with the light of your eyes? Because you cherished, welcoming, the flowers I offered you, and said to me, whenever I said goodbye:

- *Stay, because your presence gives me pleasure?* - and giving me a thousand little signs of preference that lead men to think they are loved? Now, however, I understand that all this was due to my kinship with

Cáius... I agree that I was a madman who daydreamed, but as for you, Cáius, be disillusioned if you think that I could still love that woman! No, never! The coldness of her dagger disenchanted me forever, and I'll hate her forever...

He paused for a moment, choked, hands clenched.

- Today I'm convinced that the woman I loved was nothing more than a false mirage, like the sirens that lure the unwary to lose them. In short: there is an unbridgeable abyss between us, because if one has stolen my heart and my father's home, the other has kidnapped my hope for the future. So, I leave without reconciling with you, and one day I'll return to pay you, my debt.

He turned his back and walked away quickly. Silent, overwhelmed, the young spouses went home.

- Oh, you abominable creature, why didn't I kill you at once - said Virgília, throwing herself on a chair. - Cáius, be careful, my love; I have a feeling that your brother will bring us great misfortune yet. Wicked, without religion, he hates us to death. That's what I read in his eyes, which seemed to want to devour me.

- Calm down, my Virgília, don't exaggerate an imaginary danger like that. Nero is more to be feared in words than in deeds. I, for one, don't fear his threats, for it is the gods who count our days in this world: nevertheless, I promise you that I'll always keep my eyes on him, for your sake and for my father's. Now, be still, dry those tears and go, as you wish, to Metela, whose friendly and always considerate word will clear your spirit. I, in turn, am going to look for the old man, with whom I need to talk about some business.

Impatient to confide her apprehensions to her friend, Virgília immediately went in search of Metela, who was found among the maids, checking the luggage.

- Any news? You look so surprised! - she said, motioning to Virgília to accompany her to the terrace.

When they arrived, they sat down, and she continued:

- Did you have an unpleasant encounter with Nero? I presume so, because I saw him on his way back from the garden and he had

something fierce in his eyes. He also told me that he was going immediately to the ship and would wait for us there.

Lachrymose, Virgília threw herself into her friend's arms and told her what had happened.

- The gods are not fair - she ended up saying - letting this abominable man to whom we granted everything live, and who, for no reason, pursues us with his vengeance. You can't calculate what life is like when it's threatened by invisible danger, which we can neither predict nor know how to avoid.

With her face in her hand, Metela listened silently to everything, and little by little her face darkened with bitter sadness.

-You're wrong to suppose me incapable of understanding your fears. I too had a tenacious and implacable enemy and like you I trembled in expectation of an invisible and ever threatening danger; I know from experience that, in these cases, we can't help but concentrate all our energies and leave the rest to the gods.

Virgília stood up, resolute, and tears welled up in her eyes, bright with curiosity.

- So, did you have an enemy like Nero? Some refuse boyfriend, I bet... But, how did you keep such an interesting thing from me until now?

- You were very young when it happened, and, besides, Agripa and I always avoided telling the sad episodes that preceded our marriage.

- But at least you could confide them to me, couldn't you? I can't resign myself to ignoring what closely concerns you. Now I understand why you kept quiet whenever I asked you about your single life...

- Be patient, my little snoop, don't blame me. Since you make such an effort, I'll tell you about this episode from my youth, from which a useful lesson derives, namely: even in the most critical circumstances, one should not lose his head or despair of the mercy of the immortals.

He concentrated for a moment and then continued: - You know that I was born and raised in Rome, orphaned from the cradle, because my mother died precisely while giving birth to me. Although in the prime of life, my father, rudely tried by the "loss of five children and the wife he adored, didn't want to marry a second time and concentrated all his affection on me and my brother.

"My brother Sérgio was ten years older than me, and yet my father raised and educated us together as much as possible. So, I grew up among rhetoricians, philosophers, and artists, who instructed my

brother and whom he also liked to approach, whenever his senatorial function allowed him to do so. An old stoic, named Aurélius, became particularly fond of me, and taught me from an early age, giving me a true stoicism. My father condescended, smiling, and it is certain that the influence of that circle of wise men didn't fail to contribute to give my character that severe and somewhat manly stamp that I'm sometimes reproached for.

"Happy and benighted with all, I reached the age of fifteen, when the candidates began to appear; but, as none satisfied me entirely, my father disposed of me, and thought himself happy to keep me in his company.

"I must tell you that we then owned, near Tibur, a charming villain, in which we spent all the time he could steal from the affairs of the state.

"One evening, after dinner, we had visitors: my brother and I were doing the honors of the house, while we waited for my father, who was already delayed. Everyone was gathered on the terrace, and I was singing the lyre, when I saw my father enter, followed by a tall young man who was a stranger to me.

"While my father was greeting the guests, I noticed that the newcomer's big brown eyes were fixed on me with deep admiration, which he didn't try to hide. I couldn't tell you why that gaze chilled me to the marrow of my bones. It was as if I had the pupils of a tiger stuck in me, and I soon felt an invincible aversion for the intruder.

"Soon he was introduced to me, and I learned that his name was Flávius Sulpícius Varro, who was passing through Rome to settle matters of interest to him, and for which he had sought out my father, as his friend.

"Eager to hear details of his life after they had parted, my father brought him home that day.

"From then on, visits became frequent, and he insisted on courting me, despite the glacial indifference with which I corresponded. It was precisely on this occasion that I met Fabrícius Agripa, who, mortally wounded in battle in northern Gália, had come to Rome to claim his retirement and come into possession of a large inheritance. Agripa was a close friend of my brother's and visited him often. He soon fell in love with me, and it goes without saying that his inclination could only please me, even more so because, by his frank and loyal character, by his interesting and varied prose, he immediately inspired in me the sympathy that would evolve into our love.

"Flávius Sulpícius followed my intimacy with Agripa with jealous eyes. He went out of his way to pay me visits and to charm me, but

whenever he met Agripa, his anger was such that I should have foreseen any misfortune. However, in my foolish vanity, I considered myself invulnerable and even flattered myself with that jealousy.

"One morning, my father came to me in delight to tell me that Flávius had asked me to marry him and that he had almost said yes, but only depended on my assent, which he was counting on. I peremptorily refused, and for the first time my father insisted, claiming that the match was one of the most auspicious. He called me crazy. However, I stood firm, and he had to surrender. The next day, he came to tell me, in a bad mood, that Flavius, who was very upset, had left Rome. I sincerely prayed that I would no longer have to put up with that face and that I would be able to connect more with Agripa, who spent half his days at our house.

"One evening we were gathered together, he and I and my brother, when I noticed that the latter was distracted and preoccupied. After much questioning, he confessed that he needed to go out for a walk, but not wanting to be recognized and approached by indiscreet friends, he wanted to borrow Agripa's helmet and cloak. After he left, Agripa said laughingly that he suspected he was jealous of a young flower girl, whom he wanted to surprise in disguise. With my father's arrival, the conversation changed course. Meanwhile, the night went on and Sérgius didn't return.

"By dawn, I awoke to the cries and shouts of despair throughout the house. Trembling with astonishment, I hastily dressed and went downstairs. Under the arches of the first gallery, I watched my father wringing his hands, while I listened to an officer pointing to a stretcher bearing soldiers and surrounded by a compact crowd of onlookers, which stretched across the garden to the street. In the stretcher, a body and on the body a cloak, which I recognized as Agripa's!

"Giving a cry, I rushed to the stretcher and my gaze fell immediately on the livid face of my unfortunate brother. Then I heard that the triumvir in charge of the night police had found him lying face down on one of the streets near the Forum. The deep wound on his back proved that he had been treacherously attacked. Death should have been instantaneous.

"Impossible to describe to you, our despair! Everyone was lost in conjectures as to the motives of the crime: it wasn't robbery, because the purse and the precious jewels the victim was carrying were intact; the idea of vengeance was equally inadmissible, because Sérgius was good, helpful, generally esteemed, he didn't have, and couldn't have, enemies.

"The day before the funerals, I went to the temple to pray and

offer sacrifices to the manes of my unfortunate brother. On my way back, my drivers had to break through the crowds of people crowding around the house, eager for the alms and vittles my father had ordered to be distributed that day. As we walked slowly through the crowd, a dark-haired, bearded man, dressed like the porters of the port, stood in front of the litter, and gave me a look of fire, which made me shudder and almost lose consciousness. I would recognize those eyes among a thousand or ten thousand others, wherever I met them. That apparition was like a blindfold tearing in front of me. Flávius Sulpícius had not left Rome, but had stayed there and was trying to eliminate his rival. Agripa's helmet and cloak were what had driven him to kill Sérgius. My heart was pounding because I also knew what I could expect from such an enemy.

"I revealed nothing to my desolate father, but had an understanding with Agripa, entrusting everything to him and swearing that it should belong to him, but at the same time asking him to leave Rome for a while, until my father could more comfortably sanction our marriage.

"Seeing my agitation, he acquiesced, promised to always carry a gun, and left town the very next day.

"I could breathe easier, but the fact was that my peace of mind was gone. It was in this way, always in great distress, that I awaited the fiancé's letters, through a faithful slave, while other incidents indicated to me that the enemy was watching and scheming in the darkness.

"In fact, one time when I was on my way to the city, my litter was attacked, and it was only by chance that I was saved. From that day on, I refrained from leaving Rome, and at the same time, I let myself be carried away by ominous omens. Well-founded omens, in fact. One day, after the meal, my father felt ill, and the doctor declared that the asparagus was poisoned. All the resources of science were exhausted - and after an agonizing night, my father expired in my arms. Simple chance, or another crime?

"That mournful night, I was kneeling by my father's body, when thick smoke and cries of "fire! Suddenly, a mob of slaves invaded the entire house, eager to Bulvar whatever possible. One of my maids led me out into the street through an already crumbling, smoky gallery. The crackling of the fire and the shouts of the populace were joined in a stormy, indefatigable chorus... There was a moment when a thick cloth wrapped around my head, and I felt trapped in the back and quickly transported. I tried to resist, to scream, but the thick cloth muffled my voice, and powerful arms hindered my movements.

Finally, I was dizzy, I fainted. When I woke up, a slight rocking and the rhythm of the oars hitting the water made me realize that I was in a moving boat, and at the same time I heard an imperative voice ordering me: - Slowly moor, Stíchus; take this woman to the cabin, and the rest of you stay alert to the first voice of - setting sail.

"My heart was paralyzed in my chest, that voice was that of Flávius Sulpícius, so I was in the power of the enemy. I felt as if they were carrying me to the ship and depositing me on a divan. They removed the cloth that covered my head and face, I heard a door close.

"I opened my eyes and saw that I was in the richly furnished cabin of a splendid galley. Beside it, a small table and on it were wines, liquors, and fruit. I realized that this solicitude wasn't going to last much longer, and I tried to concentrate all my energies. Since the first kidnapping attempt, I've never stopped carrying a dagger, hidden under my clothes. Not even the slave girls, whom I mistrusted, were aware of this precaution. My first care was to look for that weapon and there it was in its place. I took heart. In the worst-case scenario, the most that could happen to me was that I would succumb. But first I wanted to play cunning games, to see if I could fool the terrible man who had done me so much harm.

"Hasty footsteps were approaching, I interrupted the thread of ideas, rose to my feet, and, palpating the dagger between the folds of my tunic, leaned against the table. Coming upon me thus and fixing my calm gaze, he stopped indecisive and disappointed.

"- I see with pleasure - he finally said - that you're calm and perhaps we can talk reasonably.

"- First of all, I want to know by what right a Roman citizen is thus violated. Don't forget that you're talking to a senator's daughter and not to a slave... " - I want to know that I love you and that I'm not one of those who allow themselves to be humiliated. Here, in this galley, there is only one law - my will. It's up to you, therefore, whether you're queen or slave. Don't deceive yourself with the chance of any help. The very adventurous soldier you preferred to me is far away from us, perhaps out of prudence.

"- So, you want to give me up for dead and keep me here as a prisoner? Well, look: I prefer death to such opprobrium. See? here is what I must free me from tyranny. - And he showed her the shiny dagger. - Don't come any closer because I'll die before you touch me.

"He saw, no doubt, in my look, that I wasn't joking, since he flinched, red, and with words full of emotion, he went on to speak of the senseless passion that I had inspired in him and swore that he would not back down even in the face of a crime. In the meantime, he

proposed to marry me, and explained his intention to take me to Massília, where he had large possessions, so that we could celebrate the wedding there.

"I listened to him with my head down, pretending to be surprised and satisfied.

"I didn't think - I told him at last - that you could love me to such an extent, and I see that your love is one of those that can tame the heart and the pride of a woman. I don't repudiate you anymore, Flávius, even because, besides, it wouldn't do any good; but deign to hear my conditions: in the first place, I won't follow you to Massília, because I don't want to compromise my reputation in this trip, which, besides, doesn't justify anything. Sérgius Metelus' daughter must marry publicly, solemnly, never by stealth like any obscure girl from Eaquilino. Furthermore, I want you to give me three months to mourn, in spiritual retreat, the loss of my father; and since Rome has become undesirable to me, I want to transport myself to Herculaneum, to the house of an old friend of my father. There you'll come for me as soon as the mourning period is over, and from then on, I'll consider myself your bride.

"- But who is responsible for your fidelity?

"- My word - I answered haughtily - even because your distrust is worth an offense.

"- Well, then: I accept, and I ask you, as a pledge of alliance, to receive this ring and give me, right here, the nuptial kiss.

"I let her hug me and hold the ring. We then agreed that he would drive me home and from there to Herculaneum, after attending his father's funeral.

"When I returned home, there was still great confusion, and no one had noticed my absence. The next day, Flavius paid an official condolence visit, attended the funeral services, and discreetly supervised my departure for Herculaneum. I finally arrived there, sad, overwhelmed, and was welcomed with open arms by the magnanimous Virgilius and his wife Lélia.

- What do you mean? So, it was at my parents' house that you were welcomed? - exclaimed Virgília, surprised.

- Exactly, and it was there that I saw, for the first time, a very familiar little girl. I confided my tragedy to your parents, and Virgilius, who knew Agripa, advised me to hasten the wedding, as soon as he returned from the trip he proposed to make to Rome, in order to intervene with an uncle of Flávius, so that he would stop the crazy adventures of his nephew.

"Everything went according to the plan drawn up by your father,

who returned bringing the consul's most serious promises. Agripa visited me discreetly and the wedding was about to take place when one morning Flávius suddenly appeared in the room where I was with my fiancé, who, by the way, was about to leave.

Fleeting with rage and cursing, he threw himself at Agripa to stab him. Agripa also ran at him and pulled out his dagger. A silent fight ensued between the two, a tremendous, death struggle. Gritting their teeth like hungry tigers, the two men fought body to body, while I fell petrified, fearful of disturbing or distracting my Agripa. However, only I know what I felt seeing the blood that flowed from him.

"Suddenly, Flávius collapsed. Agripa took a few steps to my side and fell too! Virgílius soon ran with the servants, they lifted the wounded, and called for physicians. Flávius could not resist his injuries, he expired two days later. Agripa recovered only slowly. I didn't rest a minute at his bedside, and as soon as he got up, we got married and settled there in that manor house you knew, now cinder-blocked and where we spent years and years of joy.

- Dear Metela, the gods have taken pity on you, they have rid you of a dangerous and ignoble enemy. I don't envy you your luck, even because, after the loss of my parents, you were for me the best of mothers, the most loving of sisters and the most faithful of friends. No, I only regret that death has not delivered me from this abominable Nero.

- In this I agree with you, and it is a thousand times regrettable that your stab wound, once fired, didn't kill him immediately. Nevertheless, calm down, don't be discouraged. I'll watch over him while he's in our house, I'll try to contain him as much as possible. Besides, the service will distract him, since Agripa informed me that he changed his mind and ended up giving up his license. We are thus understood. Here come Agripa and Semprônius, probably looking for us for the farewell lunch.

The day after Metela's departure, Drusila also decided to return to Rome. Everyone urged her to stay a while longer. But to no avail. Cáius, who was very far from suspecting her cousin's passion and who was most grateful for her assistance and care during the nursing, wanted to accompany her. He refused.

- I must return to Cláudius, since I'm no longer needed here. And you, Cáius, now fully restored, stay by your wife's side. She has escaped losing you, and she can't be at ease except by seeing you by her side. It's only natural.

Trying hard to appear calm, she said goodbye to her uncle and her

cousins, but as soon as she found herself alone in the litter, she lost her factional courage and began to sob violently. The separation from Cáius made her heart bleed, and although she understood very well the culpable nature and uselessness of her love, she didn't feel strong enough to banish from her heart those feelings which had taken possession of her, always masked before others, but in truth, absolute masters of her entire being.

Thus, under that impression that evil fates had led her to enslave herself to a lord, and lord of the mark of Cláudius, who, esteeming nothing else but fortune, dearly would make her pay for her predilection for Cáius, a predilection he had guessed, intimately chilled, she already imagined the scenes of brutal jealousy she would have to endure and of which she had already had a taste. She didn't conjecture, in her naïveté, that the cunning and malleable Cláudius already deeply regretted being thus unmasked. Enjoying, for the first time in his life, the lust to act like a lord, to spend and satisfy all his passions and whims, he wasn't inclined to irritate his wife, who might well deprive him of the administration of his property, and he was, therefore, willing to reconcile, to live in the best possible agreement.

That is why, when Drusila arrived in Rome, she was pleasantly surprised when her husband received her with the most tender deference. Helping her off the litter, he led her to her rooms and frankly apologized for her early departure, assuring her that his greatest desire was to live in good harmony with the beautiful and gentle companion the gods had destined for him.

She, who only aspired to peace, gladly forgave him, and, by tacit agreement, they lived apparently very close together, although fundamentally separated.

The girl was all absorbed in melancholy homage to her father's memory: she surrounded herself with the objects he had used, took long walks in the places where she once guided him in his blindness, and finally had a superb mausoleum erected for him.

Cláudius didn't contradict her in any way, but rather rejoiced that his wife let him spend at his ease, and didn't worry about his amorous adventures, nor even about the excesses of his worship of Jesus.

He was happy that she consented to preside, with gracious docility, over the sumptuous parties he liked to promote. Certainly, no one would recognize the modest musician in that patrician, who attracted the cream of Roman society to the magnificent halls of the palace of Drúsus, who considered the invitation Semprônius had once extended to him to live in his house, free of expense, pain and care, a great happiness.

VI

The Death of Semprônius

A regime of calm and relative rest was established in Semprônius' home after the departure of his guests, but this regime was short-lived, for he soon developed a dangerous illness, which was soon overcome.

Nevertheless, his health was compromised. The robust and dynamic man that he had always been, he now had difficulty walking, his back was pumping, he spent his days lying down and overcome by extreme weakness.

The birth of a grandson was like a last flash of joy in the poor patrician's sad sunset.

Full of pride and satisfaction, he had blessed the little Semprônius and never ceased to admire him, also because, with his big black eyes and golden hair, he was a portrait of his ancestors.

Torn between grief and sorrow, Cáius Lucílius went from his son's cradle to his father's bedside, whose progressive exhaustion left him no illusions.

One day, Semprônius said to him:

- Son, we have no time to lose, given that we must visit the virtuous old man who has edified you in the doctrine of the Divine Master.... For my part, I wish to hear from him words of comfort that will assure me of peace in the kingdom of heaven.

The young man immediately considered it his sacred duty to take care of the preparations for the trip.

He tried to write to Agripa, telling him that force majeure obliged his father to leave the house for two or three weeks, and asked him to allow Metela to keep Virgília company.

Virgília, although surprised and upset by the mysterious trip, didn't oppose it, understanding that, given her precarious state of health, her father-in-law could not go alone. As soon as Metela arrived, the old patriot bid the two women the most tender farewells, and they wept copiously as if they sensed they would never see him again.

After a tiring journey, interrupted by long stops that were indispensable to the sick man, they arrived at the village beyond which stretched the mountains that sheltered the hermit in his tomb.

There they left the animals and exchanged the litter for a light reed chair, carried by two sturdy mountain men, accompanied only by Rutuba, who was always devoted.

After a painful march, during which the patrician grew impatient, they arrived at the door of the cave. The venerable Anchorite was

standing there, robust, and serene, just as he had been three years before. In a smile of warm friendship, he held out his arms to them:

- Welcome, friends! I was expecting you.... Cáius embraced him, moved, and spoke:

- My savior and generous protector, your predictions have come true.... As you see, here I bring my dying father to you for your instruction and comfort.

John went to Semprônius, embraced him effusively and said to him:

- Welcome, my brother, be assured that I'll do my best to relieve you, but first of all, you must rest.

Helped by Cáius, he supported and led Semprônius into the cave, where he laid him down on the same table that had been used for his son. Then, with youthful ardor, he took care of the installation of the guests. The two mules were unloaded of their luggage and taken to another nearby cave, which had been designated for the lodging of Cáius and Rutuba. They dismissed the mountaineers, and, after a light meal, the old man sat down on a log near Semprônius and said to him affectionately.

- Now, my brother, let us talk, and the God of mercy I've revealed to your son will inspire me to comfort you.

- Venerable friend - said Semprônius, rising and taking his hand - my son has transmitted to me the precepts of love and charity preached by the divine Master that you've been given to know; for my part, I wish to share your faith; until now I've led the happy and carefree life of a rich man; I've always had the prerogative of repelling what displeased me, so much so that I've loved some and despised other members of my family. Now, however, I'm beginning to understand that I was unpitying, proud, selfish, and I would like to reveal to you many acts that weigh on my conscience, so that you may advise me and perhaps soften my remorse.

- In that case, accompany me to the sanctuary and there, under the eyes of the one who reads the core of souls and can relieve them, you'll confide to me what is oppressing your heart. Cáius, help me to lead your father to the altar steps, and then retire, because if what Semprônius wants to confess is bitter to his heart, it is useless for you to know what your father reproves in himself. It isn't up to children to judge their parents' faults, because nothing can or should diminish their respect and veneration for them.

Hours later, he called the young man and, shaking his hand, said:

- I talked at length with your father and I was able, thanks to the Lord, to bring peace to his spirit: I made him see the great truths of

our faith, I unveiled to him the mystery of death and with that the fears of the ineluctable transition faded from him. For the moment, he wants to isolate himself, he doesn't want to see anyone, not even you, in order to, through isolation and prayer, receive the baptism I promised him in three days.

- And me, Father, will you not grant me this grace? My heart is also full of faith and love for the God of mercy, whose grace has touched me.

- Let it be as you wish, for I recognize that you have a loyal and generous heart, even if it is clouded by violent passions. But, in this case, you should prepare yourself by retreating, fasting, and praying, in order to receive the divine sacrament.

He left, blessing the penitent.

Cáius returned to his cave and, after a short prayer, stretched out on the cushions he had improvised as a bed. Contradictory thoughts came to his mind: his father had renounced his ancestral faith to become a Christian, and he too was going to follow his example. Suddenly the consequences that could result from such a serious resolution came to his mind. At that moment, Christians were not persecuted, but at any moment a new edict of proscription could strike them; and then, what he risked was nothing more or less than his fortune, the love of his family, and perhaps his own life. The images of Virgília and her little son came to his retina, like a tempting vision, but soon, by an effort of will, he repelled those ideas blown, no doubt, by the spirit of evil. But how? How could he, who had felt the grace, doubt the omnipotence and protection of that God who had seen fit to reveal Himself to men, humble, poor, dead on an infamous cross, and who, nevertheless, bent to His precepts of love a haughty and revealed heart, like that of Semprônius, while inspiring his proselytes to despise life to the point of martyrdom?

With that exaltation typical of his character, Cáius gave himself to prayer and fasting. Rutuba's presence seemed inconvenient to him, and as soon as daylight came, he was excused for three or four days in order to visit a relative married to a neighboring farmer.

On the morning of the day fixed for the holy ceremony, after having watched and prayed all night, Cáius went to the hermit's cave. When he saw his father, he was immediately surprised by the expression of serenity and joy that shone on his face.

- Remocei, son - said the old patrician, embracing him - if you only knew how I've refreshed my spirit, the light and peace that have filled my being! But, let us hurry, give me your arm, for we are already expected in the sanctuary.

Supporting the father, they entered the adjoining cave. They knelt before the altar, on the super surface of which, standing, was the hermit, almost unrecognizable in his paramount of immaculate whiteness, falling to his feet. He had a golden cross on his chest, and the torches lit on the altar gave his venerable forehead a sort of glowing halo. Beside him, also standing, was a young man wrapped in a long tunic, and in whom Cáius recognized the young fisherman who, at the time of his illness, was carrying the provisions.

After a short prayer in common, followed by a speech in which he summed up the magnitude of the sacrament they were about to receive, the hermit ordered them to undress and enter the pool dug in the center of the cave. With the help of Paulo, the young fisherman, he poured water over their heads and gave Semprônius the name of Seraphim, and Cáius the name of Gabriel.

Then they left the pool, and Paulo clothed them in white robes like his own, and helped Semprônius, still weak, to kneel and resume his position on the last step of the altar.

The hermit, arms outstretched to the cross, eyes inspired, pleaded aloud:

- "Lord Jesus, my redeemer and teacher, hear this supplication: did you not say that where two or three are gathered in your name, there you would be? Cast, then, a glance of mercy upon these two new servants of your doctrine and allow them to enjoy the grace of this act that I'm about to perform in your name and memory."

With a grave expression of majesty, he opened a little box that was on the altar, from it he took out a golden chalice, which Paulo filled with wine, giving him also a loaf of bread, which he then broke.

- "I believe - he said, raising his voice - that this is your flesh, and this is your blood, shed for the salvation of us all."

He lifted the chalice, blessed the pros ternate neophytes, and gave them of the bread and wine, saying:

- "Believe that here is the flesh and blood of the savior of the world, for the great mystery of faith has just been worked."

As if there was no need to wait for the end of that act, Semprônius fainted... They carried him to the first cave, where he was given all possible help. When he came to, the hermit laid his hands on him, and he fell into a restful sleep.

It was already night when he reopened his eyes. When he saw Cáius and the hermit sitting by his bed, he held out his hands to them, saying:

- Beloved son and you, my great friend! Thank you for the dictation that you've given me, instructing me in this new faith that has

refreshed my heart and made me understand that death is just a simple passage to a better world, in which the doors of salvation will open to me. For this reason, I also ask you, my son, to bury me as befits the Christians, and not to give my body to incineration, according to the false rites of the false gods... Do you promise to do so?

- Rest assured, Father, your wishes will be faithfully fulfilled - said a very emotional Cáius.

- Thank you. And now that I feel completely pacified, let me tell you about a strange, but extraordinarily clear dream I've just had.

Leaning back on the cushions, he began:

- I felt as if I were floating in a dark atmosphere; oppressed and distressed, I was trying, without success, to disentangle myself from that darkness, and, still full of joy at having recognized and adopted the new faith, I was asking myself why this was so, when a being resplendent with unparalleled beauty appeared to me, and said:

- Indeed, you've understood the truth, your soul is filled with happiness, but in time, this new faith, intended to regenerate souls, will be postponed, degraded by human passions, and the sacred laws set by the Savior will become oppressive, vexatious. There will be those who will ridicule, adulterate, disown it, so that there will be no place in human hearts for virtue, truth, faith. Shaken by the most dissimilar opinions, disenchanted with their own vices, the spirits who still aspire to the good will beg the dispenser of all graces to refresh them in virtue, so that they don't remain stationary in the evolution leading to the supreme end, and the certainty of immortality will help them to rise to perfection.

"Then, in His infinite goodness, the Creator of the Universe will give men the possibility of verifying, by the testimony of their own senses, the presence of the invisible ones they call the dead. And the intermediaries of this renewing proof will be your wives, sons, and daughters. They will tingle everywhere without distinction of class, of fortune, of nationality; and the suffering, the poor, the selfless, the charitable, will be the most gifted and preferred.

"At that moment, the darkness tore away, and I divined you, venerable master, in a luminous atmosphere. You were holding and waving a dawning disk, on which I read, or rather guessed, this legend:

"To die in order to be reborn and to progress always, such is the law."

"Around you as if a whole agitated crowd was parading, but as the beings approached you, their countenances quieted, and soft clarity enveloped them.

"I wanted very much to come closer, too, but I noticed that the

heavy and dirty tunic, with which I was clothed, hindered my movements, and finally paralyzed me.

- "You've sullied the Christian's white garments - said the luminous apparition.

- "No, no - I answered - I'm a Christian in body and soul.

- "You were and have been for a long time, but the centuries have passed since your conversion and your faith has become undeserving because it has become weak and lukewarm.

"It was at that moment that, from the crowd around you, a young man stood out, in whom I recognized my son Nero.

- "Come on, father, there's the truth - he said, dragging me along; but just as I was touching your legend, I felt a life-giving heat penetrate me all over, and saw that Nero was swaying and falling into a dark pit. From his heart gushed a flame of stupefying odor, which soon consumed him. I was still troubled by this catastrophe, when a ball of fire appeared, floating beside me, and in this ball stood an adolescent, in whom I recognized Cáius... With one hand you held up a torch, with the other you held a cross to your chest... Meanwhile, you had a melancholy look on your face, and it was in a plaintive voice that you said:

- Oh, Father, how I suffer in darkness! Give me light...

"I had an immense desire to satisfy you, but it seemed to me, the burden was too heavy.

- "What to do? - I murmured, raising my eyes to the luminous entity that loomed in space...

- "*Want to* - she answered me.

"I concentrated my energies, took the globe you were on, and began to rise. First, a shoal of black beings, horrid, tried to oppose our ascent; they bit me, they sifted me with poisonous darts, they entangled reptiles in my feet; others, in competition, tried to snatch away my precious burden, but in vain. Ascending always, you were light as a feather and seemed to drag me towards a focus of light more splendid than the sun. Then you rose even higher and multicolored rays enveloped you, sequestered you from my sight and.... I awoke."

Completely exhausted, Semprônius relapsed onto his pillows. Then the hermit spoke:

- This is a singular and certainly prophetic dream, with which God has seen fit to favor you. Our limited intelligence doesn't allow us to interpret it fully, but it seems to us that it portends, in the distant future, the repudiation of the law of the Lord, and that, as He promised, Jesus will have to send the Spirit of Truth to enlighten men.

- In that case, son, if I'm allowed to bring you to the light, I shall consider myself very happy - murmured Semprônius, whose eyes were beginning to fade...

- But what do I care about the future if you're running away from me now? - answered him, covering the cold hands of the dying man with kisses and tears.

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When morning came, Semprônius was dead.

Allowing his son a few hours to calm his first emotion, the hermit came to meet him in due course.

- Come, son - he said affectionately - only a perishable body lies here, and it isn't permissible for a Christian to indulge in excessive lamentation and despair when a loved one is freed from earthly misery.

Cáius rose submissively, covered the face of the dead man with a handkerchief, and left the cave with the old man to sit down on a rock.

- Now, let us take care to carry out your father's last wishes, and here is what I want to propose to you: in the sanctuary, near the altar, there is a pit dug in the rock. I've prepared it myself to rest in after death; but, since there is plenty of room, I want to use it for the good old man, whom it was given to me to convert, and whose faith has reappeared as ardent as it is deep.

Cáius was moved with gratitude, and when evening came, he made his way to the shrine. With the help of the young fisherman, he lifted a heavy slab from the ground next to the altar, under which was a wide and deep grave. The body of old Semprônius was lowered into it, wrapped in sheets, with a small wooden cross on his chest, affixed by the hermit after a short prayer.

Once the slab was put back, nobody said there were any traces of a grave there.

The next morning, Rutuba returned. The warm sadness of Cáius and the news of the transfer of Semprônius, whose body had disappeared, gave the devoted servant much food for thought. Guided

by the instinct of his devotion and by the subtlety of his observant spirit, he guessed the truth and was possessed by a vague fear of the future. Suddenly resolute, he went to the young man, who was engulfed in deep schism, and tapped him on the shoulder to say:

- My dear master, do you believe in my absolute devotion?

- How could I not? - replied Cáius, surprised.

- Then, let me tell you something: when our old master dies, aren't you going to give him a proper and dignified funeral on your return?

And seeing Cáius' hesitation, he continued

- I must tell you that the belief of this holy man, who lives here, is no secret to anyone in these parts. If the noble Semprônius has decided to adopt this man's belief, it's not for me to comment on it, good or bad, because all the Christians I've known are distinguished by their extraordinary virtues?

However, I think that everyone should be forewarned to avoid indiscretions, comments and possible unpleasant surprises. Don't you want me to go to the nearest town and bring a funerary urn, to re-enter and justify yourself at home with it? Don't forget that you have a wife and a little son, whose future is entrusted to you.

- You guessed it, that's right, and I can only thank and praise you for your shrewdness and devotion. So, do what is necessary to avoid suspicions and useless chatter.

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Eight days later, he returned home, carrying the urn containing Semprônius' ashes. When he saw his father's house again, his heart was filled with bitterness, and the tears of Virgília and Metela, who could not accept the loss, increased his sadness.

Followed by all the flowers, they went to the sarcophagus that Semprônius had built after Fábia's death, and there they solemnly deposited the urn.

When the ceremony was over and they were recounting the last moments of the deceased, Metela announced that a letter from Agripa had announced the visit of Nero, who proposed to spend some

weeks in his new property.

- Therefore, ask your husband to take charge of regulating the inheritance business as soon as possible, because I find it repugnant to deal personally with my brother - said Cáius.

- Nothing could be fairer, and I assure you in advance that Agripa will gladly replace you.

VII
Nero

Not far from Naples, situated in a picturesque hillside, sat the magnificent estate recently acquired by the young tribune.

The wealthy inhabitant of Pompeii, to whom it had belonged, and who could not foresee the cataclysm in which he and his entire family had perished, had spared nothing to beautify the farm. The tribune, however, had not wanted to pay for the upkeep, so that now, with the house bare and the gardens neglected, everything looked abandoned and sad.

A month after Semprônius' death, at dusk one fine day, we find the tribune in his office, sitting by a window open onto the garden.

Dark, taciturn more than ever. A deep crease mediating his eyelashes, a grimace of pained malice twitching his lips. Inside the room, Trula, his servant, was busy arranging on the table some rolls of papyrus and documents that his master's nervous hand had compiled and disordered. Grumpy and thoughtful, he was now sipping, in small gulps, a glass of old Falerno. The day before, all the effects inherited from the estate were over, but it wasn't a question of money that worried him, but that mysterious trip that culminated in his father's death, far from his family. In all that, he could smell a mystery and wanted to unravel it... But... where and how to proceed? Who to turn to?

Trula, a shrewd and playful boy, never stopped watching his master with his eyes hidden, and with a sharp ear, as if he had caught the monologue secretly. He approached the table as if looking to see if the amphora still contained wine.

- Shall I serve you some candied fruits that I brought yesterday from Naples? It's a first-class item, the salesman told me. The noble Cáius Lucílius is a great customer, Sapala told me, whom I met there at the time.

- Ah! - said the tribune, raising his head - have you seen Sapala? What's new at my brother's house?

- To tell you the truth, I don't know much; we only spoke briefly about your father's death and the funerals they gave him, which were devoid of pomp, so much so that the servants weren't even allowed to mourn near the pyre.

- And did Sapala accompany my father on the trip?

- Yes, he, Rutuba, Gurges, Próspcr, the two mute black men and four gladiators escorted him to a certain village near the mountains. Once there, they hired some mountain men and continued,

accompanied only by Rutuba. Twelve days passed, when the noble Cáius Lucílius returned with the funerary urn.

- And didn't Sapala find out about the mountain people where my father had gone?

- They are very discreet people, that one, Sapala told me; however, a young man told him that in a mountain cave lives a venerable old man, who visits the poor and performs wonderful cures.

- Okay, take this rest of the wine and go.

Nero, alone, very intrigued, meditated for a long time on what he had just heard, but it was impossible for him to understand the secret reason for this mysterious trip.

"I'll talk to Cláudius about it, because as long as money hasn't completely imbibed him, he's clever enough to find the key to the enigma..."

And he decided to return to Rome.

When he arrived, he went to the palace of Drúsus, where Cláudius received him with the greatest cordiality.

- Well, my dear cousin, here you're filthy rich - he said as he offered the tribune a chair. -

Drusila received a letter from Virgília reporting Semprônius' death... Have you settled the inheritance business?

- Perfectly and peacefully. Cáius, you might say, has revealed himself to be foresight personified and I have nothing to complain about in terms of my share. That's not what this is about, and that's not what brought me here to ask your advice.

- If it's about spending your money well and making it easier for you to forget about blue eyes, you couldn't knock on a better door - said Cláudius, laughing.

- No, not at all: what brings me here is something very different - he replied, annoyed by the allusion made to Virgília, and went on to discuss what he knew about Semprônius' trip and the mysterious reservations surrounding his death.

- I think I can clear up your doubts, because your words have only confirmed a suspicion that I've had for a long time. I know from a friend who was a magistrate in this province and visited it thoroughly, that there are many Christians living in the region indicated, who withdrew there after the last proscription.

He also told me of an old mountain-dweller, who shelters wayward travelers and lures proselytes into his false creed. Now, it is well known that these sectarians possess the magical gift of bewitching those who approach them, to insinuate unswerving loyalty to the precepts of the crucified Jew whom they worship as a god.

The praetor Lêntulus told me that, during the last proscription edict, he witnessed extraordinary events, parents who denied their children, women who abandoned their husbands? And nothing, absolutely nothing that could dissuade them from the terrible sortilege. Against all expectation, against reason and common sense, the wretches allowed themselves to be tortured with true beatitude, to repeat even inside the bonfire: - "we remain faithful to Jesus!"

- I'm not unaware of these facts, but, what relation can they have to the case at hand?

- You'll see. Do you remember that after the catastrophe of Herculaneum your brother was taken in sick and treated by an old man whose name has never been changed? I believe it was precisely in that region, and all of us have not failed to notice the great transformation that has taken place in your brother's character since then. What I conclude from all this is that your brother fell into the clutches of the old propagandist, who lost no opportunity to incorporate such a rich little sheep into his flock. Continuing to operate the magic filter, your brother converted your father and eventually led him there to be baptized. And now, of course, we are going to have a Christian Virgília, a deplorable thing, because of the consequences that this could bring to the whole family in the future.

- Now I understand everything, and I can only thank you - said Nero, getting up and apologizing for not accepting the invitation to dinner.

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When he arrived home, the most confused thoughts were working in his mind. He was convinced of the reality of the Christian talisman and that's why he suspected that Cáius had taken advantage of it to conquer and steal Virgília 's heart.

Insane rage excited him, but, little by little, another idea came to him. If he, in turn, were to reach for the same talisman and use it to separate Cáius from Virgília, thus hurting and punishing the hated brother at the same time?

That fatal passion for his sister-in-law had not been extinguished, nor even lessened, unfortunately; on the contrary, it had become so clouded and sour that it excluded any other desire than to always possess her. After a great inner struggle, after a few months, she finally decided to go to the anchorite's hole and obtain the magnificent talisman from him, even though, to gain his trust, she would have to

be baptized. Having done this, he wanted to reconcile with his brother to better win his sister-in-law by applying the charm.

With this in mind, he requested a few weeks' leave of absence and set out on his way. It wasn't hard for him to obtain information and, in this way, to see him simply dressed, already climbing the stony path leading to the cave.

The hermit was there, outside, sitting on the stone that served as his bench, with his hands folded across his chest and deep in meditation.

Upon seeing him, the tribune stared as surprised as he was disturbed. As if he was ashamed of the proximity of that venerable figure, who carried lies and perjury in his inner self. However, muffling that tenuous protest of conscience, he approached, knelt down and said, pretending to be humble:

- Venerable master, I'm one of those who seek peace of mind in the knowledge of a new religion. Will you give me that light which, they say, gives us a glimpse of a new life?

The old man stood up and gave the newcomer a piercing look. Then he brought his gloved hand to the tribune's drooping forehead, and, after a slight concentration, he said:

- The Lord has precepted that it is better to accept ten unworthy ones than to lose one true believer. I want to believe that your desire is sincere, my son. Get up, come rest a while, and we'll talk.

After a long talk interspersed with many questions, the old man finally said solemnly:

- Our doctrine isn't known in two hours, and, since you sincerely wish to become a Christian, stay here, exercise your humility by abstinence and prayer, and only then will I be able to initiate you into the holy mysteries.

Nero agreed. The cenobite's last words further sharpened his desire to possess the talisman. He remained, therefore, feigning a deep faith and submitting to such new and, for him, extravagant privations. Every day he talked for long hours with the hermit, and, involuntarily, the admirable precepts of the new belief warmed his heart. He was amazed that he sensed the old man hovering above all human continence, considering charity and love the only good things to be aspired to in this world. Poor, he always had something to give from the treasure of his soul; at death's door, he feared nothing and even desired it, as a victory festivity in which he should invest the mantle of glory, in order to ascend with it to the celestial father's dwelling.

Disturbed, shaken, he sometimes wanted to throw himself at the

cenobite's feet and open his ulcerated heart; he had a feeling that, once he accepted the doctrines of renewal, they would dispel all his darkness; however, whenever this happened, a crazed passion intervened and his bad temper made the seductive image of Virgília shine before his eyes, beckoning him with the talisman with which he would win her heart.

Finally giving in to her pleas, the hermit granted her baptism, an act that provoked a final storm in her soul, a last stand between good and evil.

When they left the sanctuary, it wasn't without sorrow that the hermit, after looking long and hard at his pale face, raised the cross, blessed him and said:

- Son, I've given you the notion of the future life, I've opened your eyes to the light of truth. Don't fall again into the darkness of vice and impure passion, don´t disdain the august faith that you've come here spontaneously to seek, because, in this case, the punishment will be great, and you'll end fatally.

I warn you, even though I know that all destinies will be fulfilled: do as you wish, but remember that Jesus, our Lord, also knew the traitor, and didn't stop him.

Very early the next day, at the time of his departure, Nero came, very agitated, to say goodbye to the cenobite. It was the unlucky moment to obtain the talisman, but he didn't know how to approach a subject that the old man had never spoken to him about. Suddenly, with an abrupt gesture, he took his hands:

- Father João, I'm fully convinced of the truth, but, I still await something that should make me the most ardent of proselytes: it is the talisman that wins the love of rebellious hearts. I've experienced in my soul the magic force you use to win new followers, don't refuse me your talisman, make me happy, I ask you for the god you preach.

The Anchorite gave him a clear and admiring look:

- I don't understand what you mean, nor this trembling that shakes you. Do you want to entice love? But you have the talisman in yourself, in the application of the precepts I've taught you: patience, kindness, these are the gifts with which we win converts.

- I know that - Nero impatiently replied - I want the talisman that binds you to those who approach you, making them invulnerable to any other influences, because I intend to use it on a creature whom I love and who doesn't correspond to me, all the more so because it was for this very purpose that I proposed to accept your faith.

- Then I must tell you that you're mistaken, wretch! - said the old man majestically - we possess no other magic gift than the words

bequeathed by Jesus, lord and master. He, the master, preached to us pure and boundless love, and you, foolish one, come to look for harmful forces of nature for a criminal application! Well then: - here you can find prayer, charity, abnegation, and never a filter to make you love.

Have not the master's sublime words touched your heart? Has not grace refreshed your troubled soul?

Awake, my son! Repel the powers of evil from your spirit and pray, because prayer is balm that heals the wounds of the heart, it is divine fire that projects itself to the celestial fountain where your imperfect soul was generated. Prayer should be your shield against the spirit of evil, which obscures your reason. Pray, son, and you'll have the courage to live and suffer.

Livid, eyes shining, the boy had heard these exhortations that irremediably destroyed his mad designs. A senseless anger roared inside him. All sacrifices forfeited! In exchange for a fatuous fire, he had renounced the religion of his ancestors, and the talisman that was supposed to subdue Virgília's heart, the talisman that he already considered conquered, was fading like a shadow!

- So, you refuse me your secret? - he asked in a hoarse voice.

- I forgive you, son, and I'd rather call you to reason.

- That's up to me, you old wretch; and you'll remember this very hour when I tell you so.

And off he went, furious with rage, thinking only of revenge. He headed in forced marches to Naples.

While he was riding, he was devising a plan to hurt the hermit, annihilate Cáius, and crush Virgília's heart.

As soon as he arrived, he went to the praetor's house and reported to him as follows:

"Traveling on business, he felt ill; an old man had helped him and led him to a cave, where he was immediately convinced that he had fallen into a trap. The old man was a Christian, a great sorcerer, who preyed on travelers and the sick to convert them by force. He had a boy named Paulo as his assistant. One night, supposing Nero was asleep, they were talking, and he was horrified to hear that his brother Cáius Lucillius, who had been gathered there during the flight from Herculaneum, had been converted, and was so fascinated that he had later returned with Semprôniusin order to baptize him as well. The peculiar energy of the old patrician had foiled the plan, but, fearing a denunciation, they would have killed him right there. In his inconceivable blindness, Cáius had tolerated the crime and hid everything from the vindictiveness of the laws, whispering that his father

had died a natural death. As the Nero had managed to escape, by a happy coincidence, he thought it was his duty to warn the authorities, all the more so since two criminals who had escaped from Naples had interned themselves in the mountains and were homesteaded by the hermit."

The praetor listened attentively, thanked the tribune for his zeal for the public cause, and decided that he would have the dangerous old man and his accomplices arrested anyway.

- As for your brother, I can't arrest a man of his rank without first questioning him. It is true that Semprônius' funerals were held without pomp, but Cáius Lucílius had not openly practiced Christianity and even seems to live exclusively for his family, rarely leaving the house. Today, I'll issue an order for him to appear before the court, and you, Tribune, will stay here in town, I beg you, until this matter is settled. Perhaps you'll take charge of arresting the criminal, whose den you know.

This was his wish, he replied, to personally direct the capture of his father's murderer, and for this he was grateful.

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Not suspecting anything of the terrible hurricane that was brewing over their heads, Lucílius and Virgília were sitting quietly on the terrace that same evening.

The lovely face of the girl had regained its rosy freshness and her blue eyes reflected the happiness that was in her soul. Cheerful as two children, they had played with the little Semprônius, who had already turned one-year-old and was trying his first steps on the soft mat next to them. A letter had interrupted this idyll.

Virgília had given her son a little toy and, leaning over her husband's shoulder, was reading it aloud. This letter was from Drusila. The patrician told her cousin that on medical advice, Cláudius, who had been ill for some time, intended to go to a famous hot springs' establishment near Baias. So, for this purpose, they were going to live in a house that they owned not far from those springs. Having had to stay in Naples for four days during her stay, she asked them to come and visit her, as she was tired from the trip. Rutuba's sudden entrance interrupted the reading.

- What's up? - asked the patrician, staring in surprise at the pale face of the faithful servant.

- A detachment of soldiers has just arrived, and the centurion Cornélius Burra wishes to speak to you incontinent. He accompanied me and here he's.

The young officer, followed by a few soldiers, advanced quickly towards Cáius, who stood up, pale, with a closed eyebrow.

When he saw Virgília, who was holding the little Semprôniusto her breast, the officer saluted her respectfully:

- Don't worry, noble lady, no danger threatens your husband.

He unrolled a piece of parchment and, handing it to the patrician, politely asked him to accompany him to the Praetorium on the following day.

- What am I being accused of?

- I think you should explain several circumstances surrounding your father's death and his last journey... The rest, you'll hear from the praetor.

- Very well, I'm ready to accompany you and I only ask you to give me two hours to make some indispensable arrangements.

- Perfect.

- Thank you. Rutuba, take the centurion to the room he prefers and serve him refreshments. To these handsome boys, send them a good snack and go and prepare me the essentials for the journey.

As soon as they were alone, he kissed Virgília's forehead, discouraged. He sensed that the moment had come for a fight. But who could have given him away? Instantly, Nero came to his mind. His wife's hand resting on his arm pulled him away from his conjectures.

- Cáius, what have you done to be summoned to the praetorium like this? And what does your father's death come to, in all this?

- Darling, forgive me the anguish of this hour - he said, embracing her tenderly - until today I've hidden from you a serious step in my life, but now I must frankly confess my faith to you... I'm a Christian and my father also received the baptism. Virgília stepped back, trembling...

- Are you crazy? You, a Christian? Semprônius too? What have you done, Cáius? Is it possible that you've renounced the faith of our grandfathers to adopt a condemned sect that brings ignominy and death to its followers?

- You don't know what you're saying, you don't know the purity of this faith... When you understand its postulates of faith and love, you'll also reject idols and prostrate yourself before the Son of God, who came down to the world to teach men to suffer and forgive.

- No - she answered vehemently - I'll never prostrate before the crucified Nazarene; I don't accept this God of yours without dignity

or pride, who prescribes the love of enemies. I can't admit that this belief surpasses that of our ancestors, but rather that it can only produce hypocrites, since it intends to annul feelings innate in man - energy and passions. Your faith demands forgiveness of enemies... How absurd! It is something that can, strictly speaking, be demanded from the lips, never from the heart that hates. Don't suppose that I'm so ignorant of Christian sectarianism, because Metela has had the opportunity to meet many followers and we have had the opportunity to examine and discuss the articles of the new faith. You should know that Metela is in full agreement with me in saying that the new doctrines are no better than ours and that, on the contrary, if they spread, they will create miserable and hypocritical masses, because human dignity will be trampled underfoot and will dissolve into a weak, lukewarm feeling of forgiveness, without any sincerely living reality.

Stunned, Cáius Lucílius listened to his young wife who, eyes ablaze, cheeks flushed, defended the cause of the old gods. He understood right away that she would never convert.

A passionate, proud character, he was, for this very reason, inaccessible to the bittersweet feeling of humility and forgiveness. Metela's education, haughty and jealous of her aristocracy, stoic by nature and principle, would have contributed even more to the firmness of her convictions.

- Virgília - he exclaimed - I see that you hate my faith to the point of injustice; can you describe martyrs who suffer the most horrible tortures as cowards? Do you not know that their intrepidity has earned them the fame of heroes?

- No, a thousand times no - answered Virgília, whose vehemence of language was beginning to melt into sobs - these people stubbornly immolate themselves to a utopia.

No one can convince me that, to do good and avoid evil, it's necessary to die tortured and drag others to the sacrifice, leaving around you a heap of widows and orphans. A God who demands such a thing isn't God, he's an abominable tyrant. (She grabbed her little son and knelt at her husband's feet.) Oh, Cáius, my dear husband, for whom you´re, renounce this mistake and don't abandon me again to isolation and despair; swear to me that you'll come back safe and sound, since a bad omen oppresses my heart, I'm thinking that I'll never see you again. Nero is mixed up in all this, and there is no doubt that a great threat hangs over our heads.

Alarmed by this woman's exaltation, as if delirious and with a changed face, he lifted her up and led her to a marble bench, settling

down beside him. As if drunk, he plunged his head between his hands, and a passing but terrible storm broke out in the depths of his being - the struggle between love and duty. The former won, as not infrequently happens. He stood up, pale but resolute, and, drawing his wife to himself, gave her a passionate kiss.

- Be still, Virgília, for I swear to you that I'll return safe and sound. For you, I'll make the sacrifice of renouncing what honor adjures me to defend with the last drop of my blood. I'll sacrifice to the gods, yes, but only for you and for our little son.

As if relieved of an enormous weight, the girl lifted her brow and a spark of hope shone in her eyes. They talked more calmly until Rutuba interrupted them, carrying her master's cloak and hat.

- It's time to leave, but my Virgília, don't get so excited, no danger threatens me, nor do I leave you as a prisoner. Trust me, I repeat: I'll be back soon, safe and sound.

He hugged his wife and son in an emotional embrace. At that moment, however, he felt an indefinable anguish in his heart, he had a feeling that this separation was final, that this was the last time he would see those blue eyes fixed on him with an expression of indefinable anguish. In a supreme effort, he detached himself from her arms and left without looking back.

When fifteen minutes later, the boat in which he was sitting next to the centurion crossed in front of the villa, he saw Virgília's slender figure standing on the terrace's railing, blurred in the reddish light of the setting sun.

They exchanged a final goodbye and once again he was assaulted by the idea that he would never see her again...

VIII

Before the Praetorium

The next morning, the praetorium was packed with people. The news of the denunciation against the son of the opulent Semprônius, well known in Naples for his adventures and prodigality's, had spread rapidly.

During the compact and growing mass, minute by minute, was also Nero disguised in a dark cape and wide-brimmed hat. He was pleased, he really wanted to hear the condemnatory sentence.

When Cáius Lucílius, accompanied by Rutuba, pale but calm, appeared at the bar of the court, the judge, who had just been sitting there, looked in awe at that beautiful man with a translucent look, accused of a near-parricide.

Then, shortly afterwards, he informed him of the suspicions he was under regarding Semprônius' death.

The boy was surprised, yes, but his lips were rictus with annoyance.

- The affection that bound me to my father is too well known - he said - for me to lower my dignity in rebutting such a foolish accusation. All those who knew me as a boy, all our friends and servants, are there to testify that my filial love would sooner lead me to sacrifice the last drop of my blood for my father.

The old man who collected me and treated me after my escape from Herculaneum is a brave soldier, who served under my grandfather's command, and our trip to his tomb was for private reasons, which are of interest only to us.

- To me - said the judge - there is nothing more pleasing than to be able to proclaim your innocence, and if you can refute the second part of the libel, the first part will fall by itself... You're said to be a Christian, and we well know that the fanaticism of this sect has culminated in the strangest aberrations, to the point of annihilating the most legitimate human affections, such as family ties. If, therefore, the accusation against you is false, approach that statue of Jupiter that stands there and offer your sacrifice to the sovereign of the gods. That alone will exculpate you from all suspicion.

Heart stricken, head down, Cáius Lucílius approached the portable altar, placed in front of the statue. Unexpectedly, a painful battle raged in his soul... Abjure? - was to degrade himself in his own eyes... To confess? - was complete ruin. Before his spiritual retina passed Virgília's anguished face, her eyes moist, pleading? Hadn't he sworn to her that he would return safe and sound? She took the cup as if in

a delirium and made the ritual libations. "*Lord Jesus, like Peter, I deny you, but, don't withdraw your grace from me, have compassion on my human weakness.*"

unconsciously, he raised his eyes to the statue and a mute invocation came out of his crushed heart to the god he disowned. Then it seemed to him that the impassive countenance of the Lord of Olympus was transfigured into a head crowned with thorns, and that a gaze of infinite meekness was fixed upon him indulgently.

The applause of the audience dispelled the vision. The praetor soon proclaimed him free and blameless. Supportive, warm congratulations broke out on all sides.

Thanking and greeting left and right, Cáius left the courtroom and went to the house where Drusila had stayed, to greet her and invite her to come to his penates.

In the meantime, a shroud of darkness enveloped his soul, which remorse was beginning to sting.

Nero, too, had left the court a few moments after him, furious with rage. Now, the only thing left for him to do was to place himself at the head of the escort charged with arresting the hermit, who, at least this one, would pay him back for Cáius. But first, the execution of a diabolical plan came to his mind, and, in his opinion, it could perhaps make up for the defeat he had just suffered.

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Seeing her cousin, Drusila, pale and moved, threw herself into his arms.

- Dear Cáius, is it true that you've been accused of abominable crimes? But... if you're here, it means that you were acquitted! Let's thank the gods! Who, though, could have spread such infamies?

- It doesn't matter - he answered bitterly - but, dear Drusila, I can only give you a few quick minutes; I must get back before Virgília is frightened to death. Do you want to come with me there?

- I'm very sorry I can't satisfy you, since today, precisely, Cláudius is returning from Baias to take me with him. But before you leave, rest for a while on that couch. In 15 minutes, I'll be here and then you'll reassure our Virgília.

Upon returning as promised, Drusila held a parchment in her hand, as she turned it over and over in her fingers:

- A stranger, who said he had sought you in Micenes, brought this message, and I had a great desire to render it useless, since, after

this morning's events, I suspect everything and everyone; however, I lacked the courage, and here you've the message.

Cáius unrolled the parchment and, after reading it sadly, stood up troubled.

- Here is what has changed all my plans. I must make a trip of a few days and I'm going to inform Virgília. Would you like to take charge of the letter I'm going to write to her and add a few lines of your own, confirming my resolution? Also, please call me Rutuba, to get two saddle animals, because I must leave without delay.

Eager, her eyes already wide open, Drusila took his hand:

- Where are you going, Cáius? I see that this message has upset you completely; tell me, what is it about? Look, I'll understand you, I'll keep quiet? Tell me, tell me where you're going, so that I can pray for you.

Touched by the pleading expression of her voice, Cáius looked into the pale face of his cousin, whose look was so meaningful, and for the first time understood the nature of the feelings she inspired in him. A mixture of shame, pity and regret clouded his face.

- Dear Drusila, I'm not worthy of your friendship and care; in fact, I'm no more than an unworthy man who has betrayed his faith. But to give you proof of the trust you deserve, of the affection I've for you, I declare to you that I'm a Christian. Yes! I've received the baptism, and yet I've just recently disowned Jesus and sacrificed to idols, for merely human motives. This message is from the devout old man who converted me. He's dying and wants to see me before he dies. Moreover, it seems that he has been denounced as an accuser of evildoers, and he lets me know that he's threatened. You understand, therefore, that I must leave immediately to close his eyes or to save him, if it is possible. If they succeed in arresting him, he will be lost, because he isn't like me, he will not deny his faith.

A strange expression of joy and enthusiasm had transfigured Drusila's face.

- What do you say, Cáius? A Christian, are you? Do you profess, then, that new doctrine my nursing mother told me so much about? A doctrine that promises the suffering, the self-sacrificing of the Earth, to be reunited with those who were dear to them on Earth, in a paradise of eternal happiness, under the aegis of Jesus? Go! Go to that good old man who initiated you into the religion of charity and mercy. I'll request your Jesus to protect you and forgive your weakness. Later you'll teach me the Christian precepts, for I want to believe and pray like you.

Deeply moved, the boy kissed her hands.

- It will be my happiness to be able to teach you, our doctrine; and until I can do so, dear sister in belief, take and keep this souvenir, until I return dignified enough to bring it with me.

He took from his neck a large medal attached to a gold cord, and, opening it, showed her the contents - a little wooden cross. Drusila kissed the symbol of the Christian faith and raised her eyes to the sky:

- Go - she said - my prayers will be with you.

In two hours, Cáius Lucílius and Rutuba, riding brave steeds, left Naples, trotting towards the mountains. They didn't suspect that a troop of horsemen, commanded by a superior officer, would also leave the city a quarter of an hour later, marching in pursuit.

After a fast and exhausting journey, Cáius and Rutuba finally stopped near a forest, from which the path leading to the cave started.

- Stay here - said Cáius, getting off his horse - as soon as I know what's going on over there, I'll come back, and we can work out what's best for us. If we're going to be here for a few days, we need to take care of the animals' grazing.

- Don't bother, boss, I know a closed corner nearby where the horses can stay for the rest of the year. I'll drive them there and in two hours I'll be up there.

With an oppressed heart the young patrician entered the first cave and was surprised to find it deserted. Trapped? Dead? - He thought in anguish. Then, heading for the sanctuary, he lifted the leather curtain with a trembling hand. Then he noticed the old hermit lying at the foot of the altar. Next to him, kneeling, the young fisherman Paulo was rubbing his temples with the essence of a small bottle.

with the essence of a small flask.

- Gabriel, son of my heart, come close so that I may embrace you and bless you before I die...

Cáius was petrified, he covered his face as if he couldn't see...

- Oh, my father! I'm not worthy to cross these sacred thresholds, for an abominable act weighs heavy on my conscience, so abominable that I don't have the strength to confess it.

And tears welled up in him, hot and copious.

- Come, fear not, my son! These tears are the first symptoms of your repentance, and our merciful Redeemer always opens his arms to the repentant sinner. I know what you've done by giving in to human weakness...

- Well, you know it, and you don't repel me?

He threw himself on the old man, embraced him, kissed his already cold and damp hand.

- Yes, I know that you've denied Jesus before men, but I also know that his precepts throb in your heart and you try to practice them. You see, my son, when our soul breaks out of its perishable cocoon, it begins to see beyond human possibilities. Therefore, I tell you: accept my blessing, my forgiveness, and leave here at once, for there is great danger threatening you.

- What do you say, my father? In the letter you wrote me, you spoke of great danger, yes, but for you, and that is why I'm here to defend you, even at the sacrifice of my life.

- I wrote nothing to you. Your presence here can only be the fruit of a cowardly betrayal. Besides, what could I fear who, like me, will soon be in that invisible world at the door of which all human powers are annulled? No, not: I'm above all risk, but you must leave at once. Go!

- No, never, before I close your eyes and bury you beside my father. Nor can you demand from me an act of cowardice and ingratitude.

- My God! It's late, they're getting closer - he said almost imperceptibly, and collapsed fainting.

Cáius and Paulo exchanged admiring glances and paid attention to each other. For a moment everything seemed silent, but then heavy footsteps and the clanging of guns were heard.

The violently torn leather curtain let glimpse an officer with drawn sword, followed by soldiers.

- By what strange chance, noble Cáius Lucílius, do I find you here in this den of thugs? - asked Nero ironically. - Very well! At the feet of the crucified Jew and after having sacrificed to the gods... Soldiers, arrest all three of them.

Cáius stood up, his eyes blazing.

- Let no one dare approach this dying old man. In a few minutes, Nero, you can put an end to your ignoble task.

- Why do you still dare to insult me, you miserable double, cowardly renegade of Jupiter and Jesus? Let's dig this pond, the rest of the gang will surely be there.

Cáius pulled out his dagger:

- The first one who touches the old man, is a dead man.

At the same instant, Nero threw himself at him.

- You wretch! You dare to oppose the law? - and treacherously plunged his sword deep into his brother's back.

Cáius spread his arms, spun on his heels, and fell heavily, without a groan, at the hermit's feet, which he flooded with blood.

As if galvanized, the dying man rose to his feet, lips trembling, eyes

rimmed. It was the old warrior's soul that awoke in that supreme instant, and, before the majesty of that venerable figure, the soldiers stalled recalcitrantly.

- Damn you, tribune! Cursed be thou, who spoils thy magistracy by playing the mercenary's trade! Perjurer and fratricide, I curse you. Wandering, without rest or truce, you'll come here to die miserably in this very place where...

The voice that reoccurred sonorously in the cave, suddenly fell silent and he collapsed on the ground, helpless...

Unable to master the impression that those words made on him, Nero leaned against the wall, staring with his fierce eyes at the soldiers digging the ground in a vandalistic fury, destroying everything that fell into their hands. In the blink of an eye, the cross was torn down, the altar destroyed, the lamps broken, the wine jars that the monk had reserved for his sick emptied. But all that research was useless, for the two evaders who had escaped from Naples were not there. They were about to retreat, when a soldier noticed that the young fisherman was trying to gain the exit door, and angrily struck him on the head with a blow that caused him to fall, mortally bruised.

When, an hour later, Rutuba (who had crossed paths with the escort) entered the cave, a cry of horror came from his chest. She rushed to her master and listened to his heart.

- Immortal gods, be blessed, he's still alive!

And then she tried to bathe his wound. Then he tried to help the young fisherman, who was writhing in agony.

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Three days folded over these regrettable episodes.

We find Virgília unaware of the misfortune that had befallen her. The letter from Cáius had calmed her somewhat, and the arrival of Metela, who had brought her some news of the trial, had done more to calm her down.

Yielding to repeated invitations, Metela had agreed to keep her company until the return of Cáius.

We now see them gathered on the large terrace overlooking the sea.

A large red awning, reinforced with golden rebar, protected two divas and a small table with fruit and sweets from the sun's rays.

Girded with a white tunic of oriental fabric, Virgília reclined on cushions. Her physiognomy showed restlessness, so much so that she

nervously rubbed the tassels of the blue sash around her bust.

Metela, in plain clothes as she pleased to wear them, was sitting opposite. She had finished a song, and her delicate fingers were still playing on the strings of an ebony lyre with gold and nacre inlays, in pearly, sure arpeggios that indicated a consummate performer.

Suddenly, she set the lyre down at her feet and, leaning forward, said:

- Look, you've been disliking me for two days now.... Do you feel anything? Are you sick? If it's because you miss Cáius, I don't see any reason, because, as I told you, Agripa heard from the mouth of the praetor that there wasn't the slightest suspicion left about your husband; if, on the other hand, what's bothering you is the senseless conversion of Cáius, I don't think there's any reason either, because men of his temperament don't fall in love for long with a belief, which is otherwise seductive only for slaves, who naturally aspire to find in another world the privileges they haven't achieved in this one. And besides, I've already told you that I hope to bring your husband back to the right path. So, what else do you need to make me so unwell, feverish, restless?

- To tell the truth, I'm not sick, although my head feels heavy with lead. However, an indescribable anguish oppresses my heart as if something terrible were hovering over me. I've no peace anywhere; the slightest noise frightens me. I know that this fear is unjustified, and yet my desire is to flee, to conjure up an indefinable danger, yes, but, nevertheless, immanent to me.

- Crazy, it's these emotions that sicken you, and it's your exaggerated imagination that suggests these chimerical terrors.

He lifted her head, kissed her, and continued:

- Yep! but look how feverish you're... I'm going to thin your hair, that will relieve you. Soon the blond and waving mass spread like a luminous mantle.

- Thank you, Metela, you always guess what makes me feel good, but now I must confess that it's not only these feelings that worry me, because something also happened to me last night that portends any misfortune.

Noticing her friend's astonishment, she continued more vividly.

- Before I tell you about the unexplainable vision, I must remind you of some old cases. Do you remember little Gundicar, the one who stole Tiberius' cameo, and who, in the opinion of Márcus Fábius, looked a lot like the wicked emperor? Well, if it didn't sound ridiculous, I would say that the little brute had a deaf and violent passion for me. The truth is that he always tried to be at my side, staring at

me with ostentatious delight. I, in turn, abhorred him; and when, and whenever, I sensed his persistent gaze, I became nervous. I don't know if I ever told you that on the day of the great catastrophe, Gundicar wanted to follow us to Pompeii, and after harassing us all morning, he threw himself at my feet when I was already in the car, pleading desperately to be allowed to accompany us. I confess that I would have given in; but Fábius, who knew how much I disliked the boy, ordered him to stay and thereby decreed his death sentence, because he perished in the cataclysm. Now, the idea of this boy has been haunting me for some days like a nightmare, and yesterday it increased in intensity: I could not think of anything else but the last days of Herculaneum, with Fábius and Gundicar. Then the smallest episodes of that phase came to my mind, and always from a bitter perspective.

"Yesterday you retired a little early to write to your husband and immediately there came to me an incoherent desire to review the objects I was using before the disaster that came, for the first time, to destroy my happiness and transform my destiny.

"I ordered Ivone to bring me the jewel safe, saved by Rufila, and after I settled there on the staircase, I don't know why the fear of loneliness assailed me.

"As I was overwhelmed, I laid out on the table the jewels that Fabius had given me, and there, among them, was the cameo of Tiberius. I contemplated it for a long time, and immediately the idea struck me that this relic was a fateful amulet, despite its high value, and that I was going to pass it on to someone else. With this conjecture, I leaned on the railing and contemplated the moonlit, calm, superb night, and it was then that a muffled noise, right under my feet, caught my attention. What a singular thing! The polished and calm sea, as if it were floating under the terrace! But imagine my amazement when I saw a human silhouette emerge from the foaming waves, at first vaporous and indecisive, and then a tall man wrapped in a purple tunic with a laurel wreath on his head. The face looked like Gundicar's! Petrified, frozen, I couldn't take my eyes off the sight of the man with his arms folded, who was quickly rising towards the terrace! He stopped two paces away, and then I saw that it wasn't Gundicar but a man in the strength of youth and with the same Gundicar who looked admirably alike. His fresh face, with its regular lines, contrasted uniquely with the white hair that framed it. Almost brushing against me with his toga, he went to the table, picked up something and came back to my side. His steady, terrifying gaze plunged into mine, a sarcastic smile contracted his lips.... "See you soon, ingrate,"

he muttered, "there..." - he added, pointing to the abyss! I saw in his outstretched hand sparkle the chain, on which the cameo was dangling.... Crossing the balustrade, the ghost seemed to slip in an oblique line into the abyss, and, touching the level of the sea, it merged, disappeared in a brownish cloud.

"Only then did I awaken from my daze and launch myself toward Ivone. She was sleeping so deeply that I had to shake her many times before she awoke.

"Then, more animated, I approached the table and verified, with untranslatable regret, that the cameo was really gone! There we have, I believe, a proof that it wasn't a mere nightmare and that in fact a son of hell has come to announce to me that Caronte will soon lead me to the realms of Pluto."

As Virgília spoke, Metela paled gravely, her lips trembling nervously:

- I'll even tell you, in confidence, that my husband once saw the ghost of his father, who ordered him to ransom a debt that was absolutely ignored. I even think that your vision can be explained naturally, since from here you can see the manor of Lucílius, where the tyrant expired, and his guilty spirit must be wandering. However, all this is secondary for the moment. The essential thing is to get you away from these dark and haunted places. So, until Cáius returns, you'll go with me, and I'll make arrangements for us to leave in two hours. We'll dine with Agripa, giving him a nice surprise.

- Oh yes, let's go as soon as possible. The mere thought of no longer sleeping in this house comforts me. Good idea, Metela! Too bad you didn't have it earlier. Then, before I come back here, I'll have the house purged with prayers and sacrifices to the gods... Don't you want me to help you?

- Rest, my little saint, I don't need help to give orders, and in time I'll send Ivone to warn you, so that you can get dressed.

She got up, hugged her friend, satisfied with her resolution, and headed inside the house.

Once alone, Virgília stretched out indolently on the divan. She had also regained her calm; it seemed to her that the impending danger there would stay in that house. Cáius could not stay there long; and then, with him, she had nothing to fear. He would ask him to keep him company for a few weeks at Agripa's house, until those obsessive terrors were completely gone. Definitely, Metela's suggestion was a holy remedy... Why hadn't he told her everything right away? If he had, he would be long gone, quiet, out of there...

Quick, strong footsteps on the terrace's slab snapped her out of

her reverie:

- Madam! - said a young slave - The tribune Cnéius Semprônius Nero wishes to speak to you without delay... You see, he didn't even wait, he accompanied me, here he's...

She stood up, already livid.

- Well, Máulius, run and tell Metela to be here without delay.

As the slave hurried inside the villa, Nero crossed the terrace and stopped in front of the girl, giving her a quick salute.

She looked at him with disdain and noticed immediately that a great transformation had taken place in his personality: his somber phlegm had given way to a feverish vivacity, with nervous tics on his lips and a brilliant gaze, which had streaks of madness, ferocity, and love, all at the same time. Symptoms that made her shudder.

- I know that I'm a troublesome visitor, always unwanted in this house; a visitor that is received standing up, to leave as soon as possible... I'm still, alas, a messenger of misfortune, and yet, this time, I present myself as a friend.

The tone of voice was pitiful.

- It's possible... but what misfortune do you want to talk about - answered Virgília, appearing calm.

- I'll be brief: the monk who helped Lucius when he was fleeing from Herculaneum, was denounced as a Christian, and thanks to a very fortuitous circumstance, I was put in charge of arresting him; I don't know how your husband could have known what was happening, but the great thing is that, after he had justified himself, he immediately went to the mountains, where I found him when we entered the crypt. With that peculiar temerity of his, he attempted resistance, and in the struggle a soldier wounded him severely. While I was trying to help him, we exchanged explanations, and this led to our reconciliation. Hence, I was charged to make peace with you, to be your support, watching over the future of little Semprônius. So, he expired in my arms, confessing himself a Christian and telling me that you had also converted.

As if stunned, Virgília let herself fall to the couch, exclaiming:

- Cáius dead! Cáius murdered!

But immediately after Nero's last words, she stood up as if galvanized and protested:

- Christian me? I never have been and never will be; this last slander attributed to Cáius is what defines you in my opinion. Murderer, wretch, you were the one who denounced your brother, who set the trap for him, where you were going to kill him more easily than the first time? And you still dare, cynic, to come here to replace your

victim with the widow and her son? Infamous! scoundrel! bandit! And don't I've here a dagger to wound you with the safety of my hatred? - she took a step towards the tribune, clenched her fists in his face.

Never, never, had Virgília been so fascinatingly beautiful as in that moment of exaltation and despair: sparkling eyes, thinning lips, fawn hair like a leonine mane, she looked like a badly wounded hyena. One would say that she was the exact personification of revenge! The tribune's gaze on her was, in turn, a mixture of love and hate.

- Well, whatever you say - he ended his words harshly - I'm the one who denounced him, I'm the one who killed him, and that should convince you that my passion has reached the extreme of not respecting barriers, even if they are set by a brother. Don't repulse me, I beg you; if you can't love me, at least give me some hope, allow me to stay at your side, bear with me, certain that I'll know how to win your heart and make you forget the stigma of our union.

He grabbed her with a brutal thrust, pressed her to his chest, covered her face and lips with tumultuous, lurid, passionate kisses.

She, with a strength that could not be attributed to her, pulled herself out of his arms and, as he intercepted her path to the house, retreated to the end of the terrace, leaning against the balustrade. Her face had, at that moment, an expression of indefinable disgust.

- Surely, the monstrosity of your crimes has driven you mad, or else you're drunk to insult me! But know that I've friends, and I'll find someone to unmask you and bring about your deserved punishment. No, never, I'd rather die!

This he proclaimed with supreme disdain, and soon breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Metela followed by Ivone and Máulius, who came running.

He didn't notice the wave of violet blood that flooded his enemy's face.

- Die then, perfidious woman, born to my doom! - she whispered in a strange voice - Die, before you find someone to avenge you, creating a third hell for me! You won't be mine; you'll be nobody's...

And before the girl could defend herself, he lifted her in his arms and threw her into the void. A triple scream of horror answered Virgília's last, anguished scream. Metela had stalled, as if petrified, at the entrance to the terrace. Raising her hands to her face then collapsed on the tile.

Suddenly alert, the tribune stared in amazement at the abyss that had just swallowed up the victim of his passion; the cloud of blood that had clouded his mind had vanished and given way to a new, strange, poignant feeling, such as he had never experienced before.

Silent, overwhelmed, he tried to walk away, and with his head down, he passed in front of the fainted patrician and the slaves, who were amazed at what they saw.

Then, he crossed the entire house, mounted his horse, and rode off at a wild gallop.

Soon, the whole house was in turmoil. Some men threw themselves into the sea, trying in vain to save Virgília; others tried, also in vain, to awaken Metela.

The servants were dizzy and didn't know what to do and gave the idea that they had also lost their heads, until the old herder decided to send a messenger to Agripa.

When the noble patrician arrived, distraught, doubting what he saw, he found his wife in a very serious state. She hadn't recognized him, having fallen prey to delirious fits followed by extreme prostration.

Disgusted, desperate, he decided to leave that fateful place as soon as possible. He made one last attempt to at least find Virgília 's body and then left, taking the little Semprônius and his distraught wife with him.

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The next day, as night fell, a litter drawn by two mules was walking slowly along the road that led to his manor house. A tall, dark-looking, suspicious man was pulling the mule in front.

When he reached the gate of the outer wall, he stopped and, leaning into the rigging, anxiously tried to listen to the wheezing breathing of a sick man who groaned bedridden between pillows.

That driver was the faithful Rutuba. As soon as he found out that the master was still breathing, he tried to think about his wound, while at the same time he tried to help the young fisherman. Despite his serious condition, the young fisherman had pointed out Semprônius' grave and named some trusted men in the vicinity. Without wasting any time, he sought out these people and found the litter and its bearers. After burying the monk, they left the crypt, taking the two wounded in the direction of Naples. It was his intention to stop by Agripa's house, not only to smooth the trip, but to give Virgília time to prepare to receive this new blow.

After making sure that his master had fallen asleep, Rutuba sounded the gate's bronze tympanum. A gray-headed slave opened the wicket and asked who it was that had come after hours.

- Open quickly, Sêxtus; it's me, Rutuba. We must not alarm Virgília. Here we have our mortally wounded master...

The gate was opened, and the litter crossed the long-wooded park.

- Ah! Rutuba - said Séxtus - now I remember that you still don't know what happened.

And he briefly recounted the events.

At first, Rutuba swayed and leaned against the wall, but soon her weakness turned into an explosion of rage.

- And they didn't arrest the wretch? He gritted his teeth, fists clenched.

- I don't think so. Even today we had doctors here all day. Two are still here, because Fabrícius Agripa couldn't leave his wife's bed, who still sees the crime and wants to throw herself at the criminal... However, I also heard that early tomorrow morning Agripa is going to the Praetorium. But... wait a minute, I'll call the patrician.

When Agripa saw his friend in such a precarious condition, he put his hands on his head and said:

- Here are two days worth the eruption of Vesuvius; between Cáius and my wife, I don't know where and how I can have my head... Ah! - tapping his forehead - I've an idea that might resolve the situation. Sêxtus, call some men to transport the wounded man.

As soon as Cáius was conveniently settled and the doctor had bandaged him, Agripa wrote in detail to Drusila and her husband, asking them to help him take care of the sick.

IX

Drusila and Cáius

In the summer triclinium of Drusila's small but graceful villa in Baias, the young husband and wife were gathered for lunch.

Cláudius had already taken his bath and was all delighted with a fig pie, while his wife, ever the dreamer, was tasting a sesame cake with honey. The presence of a slave, handing Drusila a scroll, broke the ambient silence.

- Madam, a tired and tired mailman has just delivered this message from the noble Fabrícius Agripa and says that it is a serious and urgent matter.

The girl hurried to unroll the parchment and, as soon as she looked at it, she stood up with a muffled cry.

Livid, she tried to say something, but her voice failed her, and she collapsed.

- By Pluto's trident! Who announces such a doom? - exclaimed Cláudius, impressed by his wife's commotion.

He tried to pick up the letter and with an imperious gesture pushed the slaves away. But as soon as he read the first lines, he sat down, trembling, and plunging his face into his hands, he exclaimed:

- Dead? Dead Virgília! and such a horrible death? Poor golden butterfly! what a sad end awaited you!

He forgot his wife, all absorbed in his cogitations. A feeling of sorrow and pity had just overwhelmed the heart of that insensitive and selfish man.

At that moment, the diaphanous silhouette of the lovely creature who was no longer of this world came to his mind. Tiberios' doctor, Márcus, hardly suspected at that moment the revival of his old passion.

How many times had the seductive Virgília made his heart throb and deplored the impropriety of his inclination! And it wasn't without a trace of repressed envy that he had been able to appreciate the happiness of Márcus Fábius and of Cáius... And now, that blue gaze, that laughing little mouth, were extinct forever... A cold chill ran down her spine: youth, life, beauty, were all just fleeting foam on the waves!

- Cláudius, if you'll excuse me, I'll take care of the poor wounded and the ill-fated little orphan. Metela is sick, there's nothing she can do. I know that you were once jealous of Cáius, but I don't believe you can keep it up in the face of such misfortune. There can be no other place in Cáius' heart but for the poor dead woman, whose

tragic end, by the way, he still doesn't know. For the rest, you have my oath of allegiance.

He gave her an indifferent look, and she blushed slightly. The truth was that, for a long time, no real affection had attached him to Drusila, whose discreet and melancholy silence bored him. However, he never failed to appreciate her kindness, and the patience with which she tolerated him, without ever reproaching him for the wasteful and scandalous adventures that all Rome was sick of knowing and commenting on.

Without answering, he took the letter and reread it attentively: Agripa described the illness of Metela, the delicate condition of Cáius Lucílios, whose recovery seemed doubtful, and begged him to send Drusila to help him at that urgent juncture. The prospect of a pendulous guardianship was drawn in his mind: if Cáius died, whom could he choose to raise and educate his son, if not the relative and friend who had given him his own wife as a nurse?

To superintend Semprônius' immense domain was to assure himself of a radiant future, full of inexhaustible pleasures.

Dazzled by these conjectures, which came to him with the rapidity of lightning, he finally shook his wife's hand effusively, saying to her with feigned austerity:

- Drusila, our place is with the poor wounded man and his early unfortunate little son. When, more and better than now, could we testify to our friendship? Right, I love you enough not to honor your dignity and virtue on the pretext of a low feeling of jealousy for a dying man. I'm going to order the "carruca" to be hitched, and I'll drive you myself. I'll not interrupt my treatment until you're completely cured, but I promise to visit you and help you often. Go pack the most urgent utensils and clothes, and leave the rest, and I'll send them to you later.

Thanking him with a meaningful look, Drusila hurried away to get ready; but when she finally found herself in the "carruca [3]" taken by three Thessalian horses on the way to Micenes, she let herself fall on the cushions and a silent but ardent prayer rose up in her heart: "Oh, merciful Jesus of the Christians, give me the strength to bear all things without revolt, so that I may be able to watch over and console my beloved, without a tinge of jealousy, contenting myself with the sole happiness of remaining close to him."

Hours later, while Cláudius and Agripa entertained themselves commenting on the events, Rutuba directed her to the wounded man's room. She went in. She could hardly disguise the emotion in her breast. Cáius lay asleep in a deep sleep, rather as if he had passed

out. His curly, black hair, in disarray, framed his contracted, deathly pale face. Were it not for a hoarse, wheezing breath, he would have been dead.

Trembling, but with dry eyes, she knelt, took his burning hands, kissed them, and again obsessed the God of Christians. Then she wanted to see the little Semprônius, and when the little boy, who was the portrait of Cáius, held out his little hands to her, smiling from deep in his dark eyes, she squeezed him convulsively to her breast and let a flood of tears come to ease her oppressed heart.

From then on, she planted herself at the wounded man's bedside, watching over him day and night with absolute devotion. The God to whom she prayed so fervently seemed to bless her care, because the sick man's condition began to improve visibly, until one morning she could see the reintegration of consciousness in his eyes.

- Whenever I get sick it's you, dear Drusila, who I see at my bedside: but, tell me, why am I not there in my room? And Virgília, where is she?

The young woman's heart trembled; she had to keep the dreadful reality hidden, no matter what, until the convalescent regained the strength to bear it without the danger of a relapse. He smiled and said, pretending to be calm:

- The first question is easy to answer: it is that Rutuba here preferred to bring you here before taking you to Micenes, because it wasn't possible to go any further; you're therefore in the house of Agripa, who was the one who called me here to assist your cure. As for Virgília, she is indisposed.

- Sick? serious perhaps; they don't want to tell me...

- No, absolutely not; let me conclude. It was Metela herself who oversaw telling her what had happened to you, but, despite all the precautions, the shock was so strong that she almost lost her mind. This crisis has fortunately passed, but Virgília is still very sensitive, and the doctor fears a relapse, in case, for example, she saw you disfigured like this. And that is why a regime of absolute rest and isolation has been imposed on you. Metela keeps him company back in Micenes and they both keep us constantly informed. Now, enough explanations for today and see if you can sleep.

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Metela had also managed to triumph over the terrible illness and had entered a slow but progressive convalescence. However, a fixed

idea dominated her - revenge, exemplary punishment. Her first cry of conscience was to demand Nero's arrest. They supposed that the news of his escape would cause her to relapse; however, she wasn't discouraged and even seemed to have recharged her energies to help capture the criminal. At her insistence, Agripa went to the praetor again, and valuable prizes were instituted for anyone who gave news of the fugitive. The tribune's house was interdicted, and all his slaves were subjected to severe interrogation. Trula reported that the master, upon his return, grumpy and silent, had locked himself in his room for some time and then had a horse saddled, leaving without saying where he was going or when he would return. All I could say was that he, Trula, had buckled a heavy saddlebag on his rump, which seemed to contain money.

Metela watched in person, with feverish impatience, all the proceedings. For her, the words indulgence, and forgiveness didn't exist; her intention was to annihilate the treacherous murderer, to satiate herself with his humiliation and sufferings. He would even exult in his torture. No one would suppose, thus vengeful, a peaceful woman, lover of philosophy, artist by temperament.

While the facts were unfolding, Cáius improved, and her uneasiness grew in inverse proportion to the improvements she experienced.

- Why isn't Virgília writing to me? - he kept repeating.

To reassure him, Agripa simulated a trip to Micenes and brought a letter from Metela, in which he said that the young woman was almost completely recovered and would bring him his wife within fifteen days. To pacify him, she was sending him her son.

This letter and the presence of the little boy calmed him somewhat, but he continued counting the days and hours, already making plans, already immersing himself in deep doubts.

On the eve of the appointed day, the young patrician, while having lunch, said:

- If you only knew, dear Drusila, the dream I had tonight! I seemed to be at home, already recovered and arrived by surprise. I was looking all over the house for Virgília, but I couldn't find her! I ended up going out onto the terrace, overlooking the sea, and leaned against the parapet. Suddenly, I saw a white figure floating at water level and, amazed, I recognized Virgília. She seemed to be coming closer, cradling herself on the waves. The waters seemed to rise little by little, roaring deafeningly, to the level of the parapet. By then Virgília was already on the terrace and walking towards me. Water was dripping from her hair and clothes, her lips were white and her eyes

glassy, staring at me with unspeakable sadness... We embraced, I recognized that I was frozen... But, what's wrong? Are you fainting, Drusila?

- Nothing, it's nothing; I'm just weakened by these vigils.

- You're right, I don't even know how you haven't gotten sick yet; however, if anything, I'm asking you to go and rest. Send me old Sow here for a while, and you'll be back at your post by tonight.

Barely containing her emotion, she agreed, but instead of going to bed, she went to Metela's room, where Agrina was also, and told them what she had just heard.

- Poor Virgília, her erratic shadow, deprived of a grave, searches for her loved ones... Ah, what a horrible misfortune that dog has brought us! - exclaimed Agripa, closing his fists, while a tear of pity shone in his eyes. - But I'll tell you, he continued, that it's time to make up our minds and tell him what we can't keep from him all our lives. He's doing well, he's already on his feet, and any chance can reveal everything to him from one moment to the next. I I'll speak to him today. I'll send for two doctors, just in case, and I'll ask you, Metela, if you'll have the courage to attend the fight, since your presence, unaccompanied by Virgília, would already be a warning to him.

The patrician paled, but soon reassured herself.

- Of course, I'll go, because I consider it an act of weakness to avoid the unfortunate Cáius at this juncture.

A few hours later, Drusila went to join her patient, who was sitting on cushions by the wide-open window.

- My friend, Metela has just arrived and here she comes...

The door opened almost instantly. Cheerful, smiling, Cáius stood up, held out his hands, but immediately sat down again, exclaiming in anguish:

- Do you come alone? And how pale and thin you look! Where is Virgília? I want to know everything; I see that you're hiding something from me? But what is it? Don't torture me anymore...

- It is precisely to tell you the truth that we are here, and we only ask you to listen to her bravely, as you're.

This he said, barely stifling his tears.

- Well, my friend - Agripa answered - listen to what happened and remember that you still have a son who needs your support.

He shook her hand and told her, in clear and concise terms, about the event.

Barely holding his breath, Cáius listened to everything, petrified. His face was filled with alternate contractions of admiration, anger, and despair. Finally, he stood up on tiptoe, buried his hands in his

disheveled hair, and exclaimed:

- Dead, cowardly murdered, without me being there to defend her.... Ah! I fell into the trap like a fool...

He fell silent. A gulp of blood had leaped from his mouth, and he collapsed in his friend's arms.

The two doctors who had been previously called arrived, and thought about the wound in his chest, which had been ruptured by the effort made.

Once again, the vital force of that organism seemed to triumph over the disease. The improvements didn't fail, but they soon realized that they could only be factitious. The young patrician's days were numbered.

As soon as he could speak, he expressed his desire to return to Micenes.

- Don't think me ungrateful, but I know I'm doomed, and I want to expire there, on that terrace where I said my last goodbye to Virgília, with the dragon that swallowed her in view.

He then gave some instructions, which wet-eyed Agripa promised to carry out rigorously. That same evening, the patrician left for Micenes, where, under his energetic direction, they erected, as if by magic, a beautiful pavilion adjoining the terrace and connected to the villa by a covered walkway. This slight construction of wood and light masonry consisted of two rooms and an office furnished with every comfort.

As soon as it was possible, Cáius returned to the pe-nates and settled permanently in that pavilion.

Agripa and Metela undertook to visit him weekly, and Drusila's husband allowed her to stay with her cousin until the treatment was over. The good Cláudius had heard the opinion of the doctors, who agreed that the boy would not go far and would gradually die out, like wax melting in the sun. It was only natural, therefore, that he should show the dying man his warmest friendship, and at the same time promise to love the little Semprônius as if he were his own son. That said, he left for Rome, where he claimed to have important business to attend to.

Needless to say, he was a real comedian, but deep down he was stroking hopes with laughter.

Once alone in that manor house that had been his delight, now definitively and tragically bereaved by a criminal hand, poor Cáius' strength weakened even more. Silent, dreamy, he would spend hours and hours lying on the terrace, gazing at the pond and letting himself fall asleep to the rhythm of the waves. Deep cogitations

absorbed his mind; he had no illusions about the future. Each day that closed in on the horizon was a fast step towards the world that could only be reached through the tomb... But what was the situation that awaited him there? How far would his soul go when immersed in that transparent ether, where one could distinguish atom by atom? Surely there must be those beings there that his bodily eyes could no longer, see? And then he stared at the sky, convinced that behind the clouds there were those beings who had been so dear to him on Earth. How many times he tired his eyes trying to scan the deep blue, hoping to catch sight of his father's face, Virgília's blond head, or the beard of the expensive monk, in the openness of a cloud.

But when he thought of Nero, his blood boiled in his veins, his muscles tightened, he wanted to strangle the coward... And yet, oh, despair - there he was, ankylosed, inert, dying... I had also wanted to hand him over to the justice of men, but Metela and her husband took care of this, and, it must be said, with implacable tenacity. Their denunciation had even gone to the Emperor, and all over Italy the tribune was being sought. Nevertheless, all the raids were useless, as if the earth had swallowed up the criminal.

Once the crisis was over, Cáius would soon come to his senses and feel ashamed, remembering that he was a Christian who adored the crucified Redeemer, the same one who had forgiven his executioners. In those moments he would turn to Jesus, fervently asking Him to support him, to help him to reject those ultrathin thoughts, not to hate his brother, since he could not forgive.

Drusila had all the ingenious solicitude of a mother for her cousin. Always present without ever becoming intrusive, she seemed to guess the sick man's thoughts; and Rutuba was the only person who was allowed to take her place in those attentive vigils. His state of mind was strange, singular, oscillating between happiness and despair. To be there like that, constantly next to him, to give him the pillows, to give him medicine, to read and sing to distract him, that was happiness... But the idea that he was slowly dying at her sight, and despite her care, that was despair... As the approach of the fatal moment narrowed in her bald face and in her restless eyes, she experienced in advance all the misery of irretrievable loss. And, on top of that, she had to conceal the feelings that were bitter inside her; she only had to show a brotherly friendship in order not to make him understand her love... The truth, however, is that he had guessed her secret long ago.

One night, sleepless as always, he lay in bed pretending to be

asleep so as not to disturb the devoted nurses. First, he listened to Rutuba's strong, rhythmic breathing, and little by little his thoughts turned to the theme that absorbed and tormented him - the desire to see one of the loved ones who had preceded him to the tomb. He knew that this wasn't impossible, for Metela herself had told him of Virgília's vision the day before she died, and the monk had seen Jesus among thousands of beings floating in space. Why, then, could he not obtain the grace to see a loved one, provided he asked God fervently? He stood up with difficulty, put his hands together, and prayed with that fervor of a passionate soul that was peculiar to him.

The sound of heavy, wheezing breathing interrupted his invocation. He turned and looked at Drusila, who, sitting in an armchair beside the bed, seemed asleep. In the dim light of the lamplight, he noticed that the young woman had changed her position: her body was retracted, her head was bowed, she seemed to be struggling, suffocated?

But what were those sparks that tingled around him and sometimes concentrated in phosphorescent plates? Stupefied, surprised, he contemplated the strange phenomenon when, suddenly, he saw a little white cloud forming above Drusila, which soon became a column touching the floor, and then condensed and illuminated its own outlines with a vacillating bluish clarity. Then, from that flaky mass, gradually appeared the silhouette of a tall man, girding a toga. The same bluish light then faded over Sempronius' shrunken head. Those brown, glowing eyes were fixed on him with expressions of love and sorrow.

Heart racing, believing he could see, Cáius let her slip out of bed and knelt down, arms outstretched towards the apparition, without daring to touch her.

- Father, my father, did you answer my call?

The figure bent down, took his hand. Trembling, astonished and at the same time joyful, he felt the warmth and density of the flesh.

- Dear Father, your hand... this hand belongs to a living person: am I crazy? Am I dreaming when I think you're dead?

- No, son; I'm no longer an inhabitant of the Earth - answered Semprônius in a clear, if somewhat muffled and distant voice - but great is the kindness of the Creator, who initiates you into one of the mysteries by which the visible and invisible worlds are linked. Don't fear the moment of your liberation from the carnal envelope, we await you. Pray for yourself and for me. I'll appear to you again, goodbye!

Cáius felt the specter's kiss on his forehead. Then it rose, faded

away, as if it had merged into the wall. Dazzled and satisfied, he raised his hands in a fervor of grace, and then collapsed suddenly, causing him to fall faint on the edge of the bed.

When he awoke, the bright, high sun was already flooding his room. Rutuba and Drusila, frightened, leaned over to watch him.

- Oh, mighty gods, what a fright you gave us - said his cousin reproachfully - for weren't you on your knees and with your hands folded outside the bed? Those prayers wear you out, of course, but I also don't know how I could have fallen asleep to the point where I didn't notice anything!

- Don't bother, good Drusila, because tonight I had a great almsgiving, which is very reassuring.

In fact, from then on, a profound change took place in him. He patiently endured his physical sufferings and an indefinable serenity, if not an enthusiastic faith, shone in his beautiful black eyes.

During the hours of greatest relief, he entertained himself playing with his little son or chatting with his cousin about the sublime precepts of the redeeming doctrine.

One day, on the terrace, he was completely absorbed in contemplating the little Semprônius, who was fast asleep with his little blond head and a naive smile, reminiscent of the dearly departed.

A long sigh came from his chest:

- Poor child! soon I shall leave you doubly orphaned....

Without wanting to, his eyes sought out Drusila's, already overwhelmed with tears. He had noticed her emaciation and the poor girl's deep melancholy, but never, as in that moment, had her secret sorrow become evident. It was the very image of pain, and one could see on her face the effort she was making to hold back her sighs and tears.

An immense wave of pity came over her, and she took her cousin's hand and kissed it.

- Drusila, I've been noticing your ache for a long time. Will you trust me with your sorrows, so that I can comfort you? My ears will be a grave, and the sincere words of a friend always ease our sorrows; speak, then, without fear, for I also want to bear you my affection and gratitude.

She shuddered and lowered her head.

- Oh, Cáius - she said - you're the last person to whom I would want to open my heart and confess my bitterness, but for who you'r, just let me continue to watch you until you draw your last breath. I can wish for nothing more.

He leaned over, and his loving, fascinating gaze, for a moment,

had the changing brightness of times past.

- Faithful and misunderstood soul - he continued, squeezing her hand more tightly - confess to the man you love what you deny to your friend... Do it without shame, because a feeling that engenders self-sacrifice such as you have honors both the one who has it and the one who inspires it. You can't attribute to me prurient fears of petty fatuity, not... Today I'm a Christian, tomorrow I'll be dust. But what I want is to free you from this torturous constraint that you've imposed on yourself. Believe me, Drusila, I've never loved and worshipped you as much as I do right now.

She fell silent, covered her tear-streaked face with her hands, leaning over the table. Then she stood up and finding her cousin's serene eyes staring at her sadly, she held out her hand and said:

- You guessed it, Cáius; if you were healthy, if I didn't consider you lost, unfortunately, I would deny everything as I've done until now. To the dying man, however, I can confess that I love him. How this love, despite your indifference and the inner voice of my own conscience, could overwhelm my whole being, is what I can't explain. True fatality, in vain did I appeal to my feminine decorum, in vain did I marry, hoping that the new duties and burdens of a home would change the course of my feelings. All, all in vain! Moreover, Cláudius wasn't a man I could forget you for, and I could not even cherish him. I'm frank, as you see, and I confess that I love you madly, deeply, but I also refuse any and every word of consolation that, by way of compensation, you would like to give me now. You know that twice I've seen you get married, I've seen you mourn the loss of Virgília, I've suffered hellish jealousy, and yet your God has become my God, and I'm here at your bedside to close your eyes, if it pleases that same God. Therefore, don't speak to me of esteem, of friendship, of brotherly love; don't try to console me, for you, less than anyone else, have the authority to do so. If you want to make me happy, I ask only one thing of you: bequeath me your son.

Little by little, her voice became firmer, and her gaze became more animated:

- Yes, Cáius, leave me your living portrait, so that I can raise and educate him. The affections, the impulses that I've repressed in my heart, will blossom into the little Semprônius, who will be the apple of my eye, the treasure of my soul. And one day, when he will repay me with smiles, gestures, and looks, which will be yours, the filial love that his own mother would inspire in him, on that day I'll consider myself fortunate. Give me the little one, but only him and not his guardianship. Cláudius is a gambler, a profligate who is digging for

my ruin, without any energy or desire left in me to stop him. He can't and must not touch the little one's estate, and for that to be so, Agripa alone must be the guardian.

The patrician was greatly moved.

- Well, as you wish, good Drusila. Besides, our interview led us to a subject that has been bothering me for some days now. It's essential to put my affairs in order, to make some provisions, and I ask you to write to Agripa to come spend a few days with us and to bring a clerk and a magistrate to legalize my last wishes.

Three days later, the faithful friends of the patrician were gathered in the hall. Calmly and explicitly, the sick man dictated his testamentary dispositions. After considerable bequests to Agripa's sons and Rutuba, there was a vast list of slaves to be freed, alms to be distributed, souvenirs for friends. No one, or anything, was forgotten; whoever didn't have a jewel, had an object of art. Finally, Fabrícius Agripa was appointed guardian, but the education of little Semprônius was left to Drusila.

Upon hearing this clause, Metela blushed and intervened:

- Wait a minute, Cáius, allow me an observation: - I find this resolution of yours unfair and even strange, since it is up to the guardian's family to educate the guardian. And once my poor Virgília's son (a maid, I may say, almost in my arms) is entrusted to someone else, I've the right to formally oppose my husband's guardianship.

- Oh, Metela! - exclaimed Drusila, already tearful - So you, happy wife and fortunate mother, are going to dispute my right to raise this child that I adore as a pledge of consolation for an existence of sacrifices?

- You're young, the gods can still give you children - said Metela softly. - and, in all conscience, I don't think you can give the child the upbringing that will suit him best, for children should be loved but never pampered and enervated in a cult of perpetual adoration, and you seem to me to be willing to do otherwise, precisely because you love blindly. A second reason that leads me to contradict you is the genius of your husband: Cláudius (he said it in a voice of sovereign contempt) is everything that can be imagined as a negative model of fatherhood.

Cáius Lucílius was moved by the controversy of the two ladies, whose proofs of friendship were equally grateful and precious to him:

- Friends of my soul - he interrupted in a hurt tone - don't thus overshadow the last days of my precarious and painful existence; accept amicably a solution-which Metela's words have just suggested

to me. The proofs of friendship, to me and to poor Virgília, both on one side and on the other, are irreproachable, they are not open to discussion. Well then: I appeal, in the name of this friendship, for you, Agripa, and you, Metela, to take charge of my son's guardianship, since the large fortune that I leave him needs to be managed with a firm and skillful hand. Regarding Semprônius' staying with my dear Drusila, I only want to add one condition. You understand that I'm paying with my own life for the error of family predilections, and in this case, I don't want Drusilla's children, who are fully entitled to her affections, to be able at any time to accuse my Semprônius of robbing them of their maternal affection. I determine, therefore, that if Drusila should have a son, Semprônius should be given to Metela, on the assumption that the little Agripa and Valérius, now grown up, will have nothing to complain about.

The two aforementioned boys, who were there playing with little Semprônius, carried him to the diva of Cáius and questioned, said to one:

- No, surely; not only shall we not envy him, but we even swear to you. And don't think - added little Agripa - that I don't understand the value of an oath. So, I swear that I'll see Semproninho as a brother worthy of my protection and advice. You can rest assured that Valérius also thinks otherwise.

- Yes, little friends, I'm at ease and satisfied, I accept your promise as if it came from grown men.

This he said, stroking the black wig of the boy, the rightful heir of his mother's beautiful and noble qualities, whose little face then radiated generosity and joy.

- Now hold your little brother so I can hug him, and then go play in the garden. Remember that I don't entrust him to you just for today, but forever.

When the children left, Cáius turned to the two patricians:

- Very well; do you accept my conditions? Metela, I don't think you'll be less generous than your children?

- I accept - she replied, already overcome by maternal pride, and also by Drusila's pleading look.

- Thank you. Let us therefore turn to business. A child's life is always fragile, no matter how much care we give him. I must, therefore, foresee the hypothesis of my son's death, and in this case, I bequeath to you, my good Drusila, all my patrimony, including this house full of memories. I also bequeath to you the fortune I inherited from my mother, except for the land near Palermo and the two villas I own in Pozuóli and Palermo, which I w'll give to his adopted brothers, Agripa

and Valérius.

Their parents wanted to protest, but Cáius tried to confirm and register the resolution without delay.

When the task was finished, the documents were sealed and signed, and when he saw the strange officials leave, the sick man let out a big sigh of relief:

- Now that all these things are over, all these things are done, all these things are done, all that is left for me to do is to thank you for your cooperation, and to invite you to the triclinium, for I want to preside over the meal today.

The small group sat down at the richly set table. Everyone tried to chat and entertain the host, who, in turn, also tried to be jovial and entertain the diners. In vain, however, the finest and most appetizing delicacies were served, which were barely touched. The glasses remained full. The atmosphere was as if saturated with poignant memories. And yet, the time wasn't long ago when in that same room and at that same table, the still robust and cheerful Semprônius, the noble Fábia, and the restless Virgília were seated, and their darkest faces were uncovered. Now those seats were empty, and it wouldn't be long before Cáius Lucílius' would be too. His friends looked at him pale, thin, and haggard, as if the seal of death had already been stamped on his face. Who could recognize in him the young athlete, exuberant with life and whose health presaged a certain longevity? The double blow struck by a fratricidal hand to the oak tree had struck its core, and the proud, already faded front was flayed and bent toward the ground.

And yet it could be said that Cáius had never been more beautiful than at that last meal! His face, of a transparent pallor, had kept its classical lines, now more spiritualized. His mouth, once laughing and with a somewhat ironic expression, had become firm and welcoming.

But that agape was an imprudence. Cáius had assumed too much of his strength, and despite his efforts, he soon had to be carried to bed. After having slept for a few hours, he awoke as if comforted, and his improvement was such that his friends assumed, if not a cure, at least a prolongation of life.

At ease, Agripa and his wife returned to Naples, where urgent business awaited them, promising to return within four days to help Drusila, who was tired from so many vigils.

The very night of their departure, the patient suddenly got worse, extreme weakness and drowsiness manifested themselves, while a dry cough brought a bloody froth to his lips.

Startled, sensing the impending doom, Drusila and Rutuba stayed

at the patient's bedside.

On the morning of the third day, no longer able to control her anxiety, Drusila sent a porter to ask Agripa to return as soon as possible.

The hours went by without any change for the better, but in the evening, the sick man seemed to revive, he asked for water and looked around with a clear, lucid gaze.

- Why am I locked in here? I lack air... Rutuba, open those windows, come on, draw those curtains. Now, drag the bed over there, I want to see the sea. If I fall asleep, don't close the windows, the fresh air relieves me... Very well... thank you...

A moment later, he fell into a deep but agitated sleep. An icy tremor shook his body. Suddenly he woke up, raised himself on his elbows, and looked around anxiously. He had never felt so bad. The dim light of the alabaster lamp hanging from the ceiling illuminated Drusila's disfigured face as she lay on the pillows. Overcome by fatigue, the two faithful attendants had fallen asleep, one at the bedside, the other at the foot of the bed. The sea wind was airing and refreshing the atmosphere, but the brownish tint of the sky and the faint glow of the stars foreshadowed the dawn. Barely able to breathe, the young patrician ran his hand over his cold sweat-soaked forehead. What could the weight that invaded his whole body, shaken in glacial tremors, mean? - That oppression, those rapid heartbeats; in short, that strange anguish never felt before?

Was it death? Was it the approach of the dreaded trance in which the spirit breaks the bonds of the body to live in another world?

With difficulty, he reached out his hand, took from a small box on the bedside table, took out a cross, kissed it?

- Jesus, divine Master, relieve me, forgive me my sins, just as I forgive my enemies?

And he collapsed, exhausted, on his pillows.

- My father, grandmother, Virgília, all of you who love me, support me in this painful transition that must lead me to you.

Her embarrassed gaze fixed on the door of the suddenly illuminated terrace. Was he dreaming? No. He saw a white cloud condensing rapidly, as he had once witnessed. A bluish light invaded the room and seemed to fuse all adjacent objects in its clarity.

The cloud, condensing and expanding, drew nearer to the bed, until from its mass there stood out creatures that were immediately recognizable. Yes, there were Semprônius and Virgília, as blond and laughing as before; behind them the countenance of Fábia wrapped in a silver veil like her hair in life! Above them all hovered the hermit,

with folded hands, raising a luminous cross, on which he could read this legend: - To die in order to be reborn and to always progress, such is the law.

All those shadows surrounded him, leaned towards him, supported him, relieved him, as if enveloping him in a misty vapor giving off luminous sparks. He wanted to speak, to hold out his arms, but his limbs contracted with atrocious pain. He had the impression that he was going through a compact mass of thorns. Suddenly, a fiery flash projected itself upon him and threw him into deep darkness, with the violence of a hurricane sweeping a feather. Then everything melted, everything was extinguished before and within him! He lost all sense of himself.

When he came out of this indefinable state, he found himself floating in an environment of silvery clarity and, shy and disturbed, he tried to examine his surroundings. It was down below, the house, the famous terrace, and the room where he had fallen asleep; the earthly sun was rising on the horizon and splashed the shifting waves with rubies, while it illuminated his room, and in this room, the inert face of a sleeping man, with a small wooden cross between his upturned hands, crossed over his chest. That mask radiated the expressive serenity of an indefinable triumph, the last expression of a victorious spirit leaving inert matter.

At that moment, a ray of sunlight broke through Drusila's sleeping face. She shuddered, woke up, and, staring at the corpse, gave a sharp cry, only to collapse faintly on the bed. That scream awoke Rutuba, who, petrified in his turn, gazed longingly into the face of his beloved master. Then, crying as if he were a child, he knelt down and kissed his frozen hand.

Extremely moved, Cáius tried to pray. He wanted to speak, to comfort those who were left behind, and it pained him that he couldn't. And then, suddenly, he found himself surrounded by similar beings, whose faces revealed love and tenderness. Among them he wolfed down all his relatives and many friends forgotten during his bodily life.

- My father, Virgília, all my friends who are here, I greet you with all my heart, and believe that this minute of joy rewards me for all my earthly sorrows.

Saying this, he plunged into space, accompanied by his friends who dragged him far away from the painful spectacles of the world...

X
The Reprobate

It was dusk. Through the deep gorges of the mountains the shadow of night descended rapidly. There was, however, on a bare plateau, laterally embroidered with brownish-green rocks, a reverberation of reddish light.

Tumultuous silence reigned everywhere, adding to the melancholy of those deserted parts.

The mouth of the cave, once occupied by the hermit, was now simply the opening of a gigantic sledgehammer carved out of the rock by cyclopean hands.

The curtain of wild lianas that had once disguised the entrance had been torn away by the soldiers when they entered, and its long strands crawled out, faded, forming here and there clumps of yellowish foliage.

Inside, the desolation was no less. The wreckage of the precarious furniture lay there on the floor of the first cavern in the dark. However, at the bottom of the sanctuary, an oscillating lamp could be seen, which gave the ruined altar a reddish tint. There, in a deeper recess masked by natural accident, the niche where the monk kept his best provisions, there shone at that moment a lamp whose smoky flame caught a glimpse of a man reclining on a sheepskin and wrapped in a dark cloak. This man, there, hidden and segregated from the world, had a desolate aspect: torn clothes, thick hair, muddy, swollen feet. He had, however, on his knees, in a blatant contrast of appearances, a beautiful sword with an ivory hilt, and a Syrian dagger, with an ebony handle and coral inlays, hanging from his waist. A sunken face and a tired look gave the impression of someone with a pandemonium of remorse and passions in his soul. Certainly, no one would recognize in that ragged fugitive the haughty and handsome officer, son of the opulent Sempronius. And yet, he was none other than the very same Nero, reduced by his crimes to this situation of extreme poverty.

After murdering Virgília, he had come home completely astonished and hurt: It was the first time he had felt the pang of remorse bite him in the soul. He thought he could see everywhere the terrified look in his victim's eyes and hear her supreme cry of anguish. Nevertheless, he remained calm enough to understand the gravity of the situation: Roman law would not fail to punish an unheard-of crime that had had three witnesses. He concluded, therefore, that he had no time to lose to avoid prison.

The notion of danger gave him presence of mind and he immediately devised a plan that was likely to succeed: he resolved to ride a horse and win some small port far from Naples, and from there charter a boat that would carry him to Massília. In that remote province, where no one would look for him, he intended to live discreetly, until, after the storm, when tempers had calmed down and his crimes had been forgotten in the whirlwind of events and other crimes, he could come to terms with his brother Antônius, whose hatred for the paternal family he knew well. He would then ask him to sound out the authorities as to the opportunity and possibilities of a pardon.

And if rehabilitation didn't come, his brother would send him the funds to buy property elsewhere, in the far reaches of the Empire, where he could hope for better days.

At first, everything went according to his wishes; he reached the chosen port without any accidents, and there he found, against all expectations, a ship leaving for Massília.

In the hostel already mentioned by Trula, there was also enough money and valuables to exempt him from care until he received resources from his brother.

On the morning of the third day after Virgília's death, Nero gazed, with relative sense of relief, at the shores of Italy fading on the horizon. The day remained clear, the sea calm; but as night fell, dark clouds gathered in the firmament and the wind blew impetuous and violent. After a desperate struggle, they finally caught sight, in the flash of lightning, of a coastline strewn with rocks. Before long, the ship, lifted violently, hit a cliff, breaking up with an ominous roar. Men and cargo thrown overboard! And the sea, of so many victims, refused only one... Riddled by a huge gale, the tribune, fainted, was thrown to the beach.

When he opened his eyes, it was high noon, but the deserted region seemed absolutely unknown to him. He felt nothing, moreover, except for a bruised kneecap, which was causing him atrocious pain.

Making great efforts, he walked along the coast, hoping to find a village, and after a painful march of several hours, he finally reached, almost exhausted, a fishing village, and one of them was willing to receive him. His badly treated knee injury had kept him there for more than a month, giving him time to meditate on his situation. A superstitious fear had taken possession of his spirit. What a strange fatality that had thrown him into the lands of Italy, when he was trying to escape from them! And why, out of all the crew of the ill-fated ship, should he alone escape? The sea had swallowed everything, and

there he was, with nothing more than a meager bag with a few coins in it. It was desperate... And to top it all, those sleepless nights, those hallucinations that began to overwhelm him.

As soon as he was back on his feet, he decided to go immediately to Italy, where his brother lived. He gratified the fishermen and had the indispensable clothing bought by one of them in the nearest town. Upon his return, the fisherman told him that there was talk in the city of a great reward for whoever arrested an officer of a patrician family, who had murdered his sister-in-law, and for which they also gave their signs.

When he heard this, Nero felt his heart leap as if it were tied to a bolt. The simple, rustic men didn't suspect him, since they saw in him only the victim of a shipwreck, as evidenced by the wreckage they had recovered, as well as by two corpses they had buried themselves.

They let him leave with their best wishes for a safe trip. And he left, not without taking the greatest precautions. It didn't take long for him to realize that it was impossible to reach his brother. With the subtlety of his hatred, Metela had foreseen that the murderer would seek the support of a born ally, and he had scattered watchmen along all the roads leading to Ravenna, where Antony lived. Like a deer that senses the pack, always fearing encirclement and only taking the risk of walking at night along paths and trails, after three months he found himself near Naples and headed for the mountains. Exhausted, trembling, after selling his last ring at the risk of being arrested, he wandered through those alpine places hiding during the day, trembling at the slightest noise, terrified, crazy. And as if that wasn't enough atonement for him, the nights came to torture him with dreams and hallucinating visions.

How many times he had already stroked the blade of his dagger, willing to end his miserable existence. And he would certainly have done it, if an instinctive feeling, something stronger than his desire, hadn't weakened his hand.

On the eve of that day, chance or fatality had led him to that stony path leading to the hermit's cave. Gritting his teeth, the fugitive climbed it and, unable to continue, took refuge in the luteous sanctuary of the same god he had betrayed. It wasn't, therefore, Jupiter's temple that offered him shelter. The cross, torn to pieces by his order and whose wreckage could still be seen there, still protected him in this emergency, despite everything.

A poignant irony of fate! But how could he escape it if he was totally broken? He would be... yes. In a corner, he found a small lamp, an amphora of oil, a bag of nuts, and some leftover provisions. Keeping

the lamp lit, because the darkness terrified him, he eventually fell asleep in a feverish, restless sleep. Somewhat physically comforted, he spent the entire next day huddled by the lamp, thinking about the tyranny of his fate. His spiritual retina now depicted the irreparable past. But things might have turned out differently, he thought, if he hadn't let himself be carried away by vile passions that completely obliterated his reason. And after all, what would he profit from the satiety of his hatred? What cruel and mocking demon would have inspired him and pushed him little by little into the abyss, turning such a well-born man, so well-suited to happiness, into a reprobate, an outlaw, starving, driven away from society, mounted like a wild beast and there, homing in the cave of the very old man he had betrayed, and whose agony he had disturbed with a nefarious act - the murder of his own brother?

Wasn't it the victim's blood dripping from his hands? His suspicious, fierce gaze slipped to the altar faded into half-shadow... Had it not been for the pale face of Cáius Lucílius... But no - it was the marble balustrade of a terrace and on it, standing, a graceful figure of a woman... Virgília!

Yes, her! And those steely eyes dug into his eyes.... She wasn't wrong... The floating tunic was hers, and now her hair brushed his face, making him dizzy... He stood up on the greasy abyss, felt all the tragic anguish of that supreme, decisive, cruel moment, heard a mournful cry and the thud of the body plunged into the abyss...

He swayed on his legs, stretched out his arms as if trying to feel in the vacuum an invisible body. He bumped into the rock and, as if awakened from a dream, stared at the bare wall, reflected in a gigantic black silhouette! Will the hermit also come to curse me? But it was his own shadow. And yet, that silent companion terrified him!

Trembling, in a cold sweat, he let himself fall into the bet.

- Cursed, yes, cursed that I'm! And why prolong this useless, lost existence? There's no more room for me in the world, and I don't have God in my heart either. Why do I hesitate to crush once and for all this heart that palpitates in me and devours me? - This brain that suggests infernal ideas to me? - What is this force that has so often paralyzed my arm? Is it the ultrasound shadows of my victims? Or is it the Creator God who governs our destinies? Ah! If only I could be sure that this God exists... If I could fathom the mystery... To be or not to be!

He straightened up and started to walk around:

- Christians swear that the immortality of the soul is an uncontested fact, and that for its crimes that soul is relegated to eternal

fire; also, our gods consecrate a Nemesis. Wasn't that storm that destroyed all my plans a demonstration of heavenly anger? But then, where to flee to? What to do? The past causes me horror, the future causes me fear... Am I condemned on earth and condemned in heaven?

In his growing exaltation, he threw himself on his knees in front of the altar:

- Jesus, son of the only God, forgive me. Are you not well avenged for my perjury? Am I not already sufficiently punished for having soiled your altar with the blood of a brother? They say that when you were nailed to the cross, you forgave your executioners and even prayed for them. Cast your merciful glance upon this reprobate, cast away the avenging shadows that pursue me, and teach me to pray, to raise myself to your throne to ask for forgiveness and mercy. If you exist, give me proof that my spirit is a divine flame, directed by you, hearing my plea...

He fell silent, exhausted, eyes fixed on the vaulted ceiling of the cave, in expectant attitude... All was silent, all was gloomy... Then a wild laugh broke out on his lips:

- Lies! It's all lies. Jesus is as deaf as our stone idols. Nothing, absolutely nothing exists beyond death, and I've been right to disown all these deities.

Quickly, he drew his sword and aimed it at his heart, but soon he shuddered and let his arm hang down... Someone had touched his shoulder and said gravely:

- Stop! Don't, my son, add one more crime to the many you've committed.

He turned around astonished and saw in the indecisive light of the lamp a tall old man but bowed down with the weight of years. A long silver beard framed his stern, sweet countenance. In all gentleness he took his sword and wiped his sweaty brow.

- Poor crazy son! You insult divinity, you boast of having denied it, without realizing that you're suffering the consequences of your atheism. Whatever the name of this divinity may be, don't reject it from your heart, for in it resides all the germ of good, and as long as it lingers in your soul, it will guide you, protect you, calm passions, reconcile you with yourself, give you hope, in short. This divinity is the one who dictates virtue to you, inspires forgiveness, leads you to prayer. In repelling faith, your soul becomes an uncultivated field, sterilized by the winds of vengeance, tossed about by the storm of unquenched passions. The most hardened of criminals is only lost when he loses faith altogether. Only the man who has despised this

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- Stop! Don't, my son, add one more crime to the many you've committed.

He turned around astonished and saw in the indecisive light of the lamp a tall old man but bowed down with the weight of years. A long silver beard framed his stern, sweet countenance. In all gentleness he took his sword and wiped his sweaty brow.

- Poor crazy son! You insult divinity, you boast of having denied it, without realizing that you're suffering the consequences of your atheism. Whatever the name of this divinity may be, don't reject it from your heart, for in it resides all the germ of good, and as long as it lingers in your soul, it will guide you, protect you, calm passions, reconcile you with yourself, give you hope, in short. This divinity is the one who dictates virtue to you, inspires forgiveness, leads you to prayer. In repelling faith, your soul becomes an uncultivated field, sterilized by the winds of vengeance, tossed about by the storm of unquenched passions. The most hardened of criminals is only lost when he loses faith altogether. Only the man who has despised this anchor of salvation perishes, crushed under the weight of his own iniquities. Mark my words, son. And now, let us kneel down, let us pray together, let us rebuild in your soul a new altar for your vows and thoughts.

Nero listened silently, fascinated; the words he had just heard were the echo of an intimate voice which often told him the same thing. Yes, by abjuring his new faith, he had banished far away the lessons of the old Anchorite, that dignity of the heart which forbids the approach of evil. In his betrayal boasted punishment, the unleashing of passions compelled him to crime and ruined his existence.

- Who are you, venerable old man, whose words soothe the ulcers of my heart? - he murmured with trembling voice and grateful look.

I see that you deplore me, and yet I'm a criminal, I killed my brother, I killed a woman in full bloom of life and hope; from my hatred for both has derived the repudiation of the faith of Christ, whom I betrayed by defiling his altar. And you're not horrified, do you not repel me? Who are you, anyway? Are you a celestial being who responds to my extreme appeal, or are you just a disciple of the Crucified One whose mercy they say is infinite?

- I'm a man like you, full of mistakes and imperfections; my name is Domítius, a humble Christian and disciple of Father John, to whom I owe my conversion. I came here with the intention of praying over

his grave, without presuming that God would reserve for me the joy of being able to comfort a suffering brother. Let me tell you one more thing son: - Never hold a cause responsible for the hatred inspired in you by the men who defend it. You can erase from your heart the "those who have offended you," but not muddy the "ideal you've adored."

The man who takes revenge for personal susceptibilities by giving up truths admitted in the innermost forum, is a coward unworthy of appreciation; rejecting principles that have supported him without acquiring anything in return, he staggers, and a simple moral shock is enough to turn him into a criminal.

If my words have touched your heart; if you truly recognize your crime, I consider myself happy and ready to help you as much as I can. Nevertheless, it is necessary that you find within yourself the renewing force that will lead you back to the path of virtue. For now, approach our heavenly father through humility and prayer.

After this prayer, with sincere fervor, Nero rose more calmly.

- Son, don't let go of the anchor of salvation, it will sustain you in your trial - said Domítius sweetly.

The disciple of Jesus no longer considered Nero a defendant of human justice, but rather a wretch struggling on the thorny path of life. Driven by an instinctive impulse of affection, whose origin was lost in the arcana of the past, he drew him to himself, embraced him, and kissed his damp forehead.

He didn't know that, centuries later, the gentleman Teobal do, moved by the same sentiments, would open his arms to Sométus, the sacrilegious monk, who, as he was doing at the moment, would lay his head on his chest, murmuring: "God will judge me, but you, Father, don't condemn me."

- Now, son, let us sit down and talk: talk so that I may see what and how I can be of use to you.

When Nero finished the narrative of his crimes and trials, Domítius said, shaking his hand:

- Don't despair: the heavenly Father doesn't want the wicked to die, but to be regenerated. I think I'll be able to save you. Stay hidden here, where no one can find you. Tomorrow night, I'll bring you some clothes and comfort food. Later on, a trusted friend will transport you to Alexandria. I've a Christian, upright and charitable relative there, to whom I'll recommend you. Eusebius (that's his name) will help you to undertake a new life, a poor one, certainly laborious, but one that you'll accept with resignation, provided that your repentance is sincere.

After the departure of his new friend, Nero was filled with hope. He lay down and slept a peaceful sleep, the likes of which he hadn't had for months. However, when he woke up, he felt very unwell, his head was dizzy, cold shivers alternating with intense heat, his limbs were limp... That nervous exaltation, which had sustained him until then, had disappeared, and there was a violent reaction from an organism weakened by all kinds of privations and moral shaking. When Domítius returned, he found him with a burning fever and delirious, evoking his victims.

Deeply distressed, he settled at his bedside. The poor boy, deprived of the luxury and comforts to which he was accustomed, far from his friends and relatives, agonized there in a miserable bed.

He was soon convinced that there was no hope of a cure. Even so, as if exhausted by its own violence, the illness seemed to leave its victim a final minute of waiting: exhausted, agonizing, Nero opened his eyes, absolutely lucid.

- Father Domítius, tell me: am I hopelessly doomed and banished from the divine mansion? I ask, because my crimes were great, and I was late in repenting.

- Son - answered the old man solemnly - when a tree doesn't bear fruit, the good farmer cuts off its branches and plants it on land more suitable for growth; so also the divine Savior gives the guilty one a new position, a new existence which will allow him to bear the fruits of virtue.

- May the mercy of the good farmer transplant me in this way - babbled the dying man, already from the porticos of eternity.

A few more shivers shook his body, which had been abandoned of its vital principle; then his face contracted and distended, to become fixed in that indefinable, mysterious expression of serenity that men don't contemplate without some fear...

Cnéius Semprônius Nero had finished his earthly trial.

Old Domitius closed his eyelids, folded his hands, knelt down and prayed fervently for that suffering and troubled soul who was about to appear before his judge.

THE SHADOWS OF THE DEAD CITY

Night. The moon sifted through the atmosphere with its silvery light, which spread like a sheet over the brownish, uniform plain, all the way to the far horizon, where the silhouette of Vesuvius was drawn memento mori, with its plume of smoke and flickers of scintillation.

That desolate plain curdled with splinters and lava blocks, furrowed with deep breaches, was the shroud of the two cities. Under the sheet of stone and ash slept Herculaneum and Pompeii, suddenly drowned, in the fullness of their collective activity, by the old flaming giant, until then considered harmless. If human eyes could see into the depths of that vast sarcophagus, they would be confronted with a spectacle perhaps even more heartbreaking. There they would see the dead city, with its deserted and devastated streets, empty houses, and broken-down temples. In the thick darkness of those mournful places, small flames wandered, sometimes isolated, sometimes grouped together, oscillating like fatuous fires. Swift and as if agitated, those lights, like igneous phalluses, flew under the cupolas of abandoned houses and illuminated some statue still standing, if not a petrified ash heap, under which was preserved, for centuries to come, the seal of the unfortunate man so tragically shrouded there.

In a house that was once richly decorated, full of precious objects, and which had exceptionally and better withstood destruction, a large group of small flames fluttered restlessly, stopping now and then near a room where two skeletons were hugging each other, and then stopping in a corridor where a group of strangers were still gathered. All those fatuous fires, bright some, faint others, moved in their oscillating course towards a vast vaulted cellar, whose walls, decorated with funerary urns, testified to their usefulness.

Little by little, the subterranean floor was illuminated by a bluish light, and the igneous butterflies changed into white clouds, and then into vaporous shadows, attracted by the voices of affection or enmity, until they congregated around a large alabaster urn, on which sat a woman of regular features, with a beautiful black wig. Next to her, the gray head of a tall, energetic man and the athletic figure of a boy with black, shining eyes were clearly drawn. Around the three of them were the actors of the earthly drama, which seemed to end with death, but whose unfolding (woe betide them) should be projected into the centuries to come, demanding from each one, inexorably, benefit for benefit and suffering for suffering. All those

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- Oh, my dear parents - said the thought of Cáius Lucílius - what terrible anguish lacerates the spirit of man when, with open eyes, he probes his past incarnations! How many faults, how many mistakes could be avoided! And how many opportunities to do good and to acquire friends are lost!

- I suffer - sighed Livia - for having repelled, with jealousy and pride, the children of my rival... And now Nero and Semprônia come to throw in my face, smothering me with their hatred, the miserable end they met!

- I share your suffering, Livia - said Semprônius us, lowering his head in dismay - blind with selfishness, I drove away from my home and my heart the beings entrusted to me to make them progress; I didn't want to understand that love can be infinitely expanded without ever being exhausted. You too, Cáius, would have suffered less if I had shown myself equanimous towards all my children. It was my austere preference that created three enemies for you, who now pursue me with their hatred.

Only here could I understand that in becoming a Christian, I would acquire a great benefit, that of alleviating the last moments of earthly life; but I also understood that this conversion alone wasn't enough to clear me of my crimes. The sublime maxims of Christianity proclaimed in the name of the Divine Missionary to remind men of the

laws of charity, these sublime precepts, I already knew them from the spiritual world, but, hardened and rebellious, I repelled them because of inconvenience; now, disillusioned with death, I see that it isn't enough to baptize the body and what matters is to retrain the spirit in humility and prayer, in order to be able to exemplify in deeds the commandments of Jesus.

Ah, dear son, how little does the human soul, dulled in the flesh, proud of its earthly asylum, understand the purpose of life! Instead of fighting against the passions and dragging of materiality, it supposes that a simple repentance from a mendacious, swearing, blasphemous mouth, is enough to make it pure; and that a creature full of enjoyments, although already incapable of sinning, can redeem faults by repeating teachings that it has never practiced. Terrible awakening here, where we see the path to follow, the formidable work to be done to tame ourselves and be able to take on a new body, as legitimate disciples of Jesus.

- I understand you, Father, but let me accuse you of greater guilt, since, converted of my own free will, I didn't even have the desire to fight for my new faith, and I even reneged on it, cowardly, as soon as I found myself on the verge of compromising human interests.

At that moment, a vivid clarity flooded the underground with the irradiation of a figure of the gentlest beauty. The serene gaze of that superior entity fixed itself piously on the penitent group.

- Faith in the merciful Creator of the Universe - he seemed to say in thought - isn't on an altar where the flesh of its adepts must be immolated, nor is it by offering the body to death and useless tortures that God is glorified. It is only through rough trials, in fierce struggles, that souls acquire the strength to correspond, through concrete acts, to the good, the beautiful, the true. But this great strength, which is an emanation of God Himself, doesn't manifest itself, nor can it be petty and partial, as men understand it. It weighs the spirit, not the letter, and that, my son, is why your abjuration in front of men will be taken into consideration. The precepts of Jesus were in your innermost being, since you forgave the man who tried to kill you, just as you helped the poor mother of the robber of your honor. All religions prescribe to do good and to avoid evil, so they are all equal before God. Thus, whatever the creeds, their proselytes will become equally beloved of the divine Master, provided they fulfill the essential precepts.

"But that isn't all I come to tell you, oh, poor faltering and troubled spirits, in order to strengthen and sustain you in your rude ascent. I'm authorized to reveal to you a still distant future in the earthly

environment. There will come a time when the religion of love preached by Jesus, aiming at ennobling the sad Humanity, will lose its efficient influence: scientific and unveiling discoveries of portions of the infinite wisdom will make men so proud that they will deny everything that they can't weigh and measure with their instruments and investigation processes. God will be nothing more than an absurd hypothesis or a chimerical illusion. Humanity will then become animalized, break all restraints and, in this blind race for pleasures at any price, vice will become virtue, wickedness will reign supreme and millions of intelligences, deprived of the moral sense, will thunder, and seek in suicide a remedy for the emptiness that tortures them.

"Whoever still retains notions of good in these evils will tremble and send his cry of anguish to the Creator, who is never deaf to a sincere prayer; but since no words can bear fruit in souls enfeebled by pride, sterilized by selfishness, the Eternal in His clemency will say to His servants: "Go down, mingle with your incarnate brothers, test their survival, their immortality, the chain engendered by evil, and spare them, therefore, a long repentance by means of tremendous expiations." At this word of command, phalanxes will shake from the Invisible, and the Earth will be crowded with obscure missionaries, who, by their faculties, will allow the disincarnate to manifest themselves to men, allowing themselves to be controlled in every way. And then a fierce struggle will ensue between presumptuous skepticism and the truth that can no longer be stifled.

"You must visualize, right now, this epoch of great intellectual struggles, preparing yourself to go through it in successive stages. If, by that time, you've acquired the strength for the good fight, that is, the mastery of your own passions, in order to correspond to the adversary's attack, which will no longer burn your body but will ulcerate your soul - great will be your reward and you'll be able, who knows, to leave this dungeon of Earth to ascend to a better sphere. Dream about this future, dear astonished brothers, and work, because the clash will be rough and? - alas for you - "many will be called but few chosen".

Casting a vivifying effluvium over the spirits gathered there, the luminous entity projected itself into the vacuum. Its presence, however, attracted many listeners, who gathered there, friends and enemies alike.

Shaken by the most disparate feelings, the most hateful entities looked at each other mutely. The desire to progress, not to miss the parade of the soldiers of Truth and to acquire the promised reward, animated everyone, but none of them deceived themselves about

the stumbling blocks of the task.

- To love those who rejected me, to no longer envy Cáius, to forgive Cláudius for his cowardly deceit, can I ever do it? - exclaimed Nero.

Vibrating, expanding for a moment in a circle of fire, Metela's perispirit floated in front of a black shadow, from which thick, smoky flames spurted out, characteristic of low and violent passions.

- Was it you, then, Sálius, whom my instinct smelled in the wrapping of Flávius? Oh, you hateful being who, in so many stages, dragged me to crime, how can I love you, forgive you, exchange evil for good with you? An extreme effort that only the prospect of perfection allows us to conceive...

- But you'll have to do it, if you want to reach the first ranks that you imagine the only ones worthy of you - laughed the spirit of Sálius...

And the shadow of Tiberius thundered deafeningly:

- I'll tame you, you'll love me, Virgília.

- Never! - she answered - I'll suffer all, I'll progress, but I'll never, never come close to you; and while you rot away bound to Foebe, whose ignoble instincts will keep you in the maze of vice, I'll rise, I'll fight for the good cause, united to those who are dear to me.

Unrest spread among the guilty, some sought reconciliation, others vowed ruthless vengeance. The powerful whirlwind of a superior will cease the quarrel and, as if they were light flakes of mist, all were suspended, dragged and dispersed in Space, in order to prepare themselves by fasting and prayer for new incarnations.

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Time, that nothing so long for man as it is incomputable for the spirit, had folded centuries in its unchanging impassibility. Insensibly, more than seventeen centuries had elapsed, falling like fugitive droplets into the shimmering bulge of Eternity, where the billions upon billions of similar pearls represent nothing.

In these centuries many existences had elapsed; the spirits whose history we have described had struggled, sinned, atoned; some had become virtuous and wise, others had remained stationary. At last, the decisive moment predicted by the superior Spirit in the bowels of Herculaneum had arrived. The great struggle of the spiritual plane against presumptuous atheism was about to begin. Before reincarnating, those who first had to do so, sought to reunite. Gravely,

concentrated, they evoked the past and looked forward to the future. Would they emerge victorious from the trials that awaited them? This was a very solemn moment: the displacement of the intelligent masses was going to graduate some and relegate others, laggards, to lower worlds where they would serve as instructors to more incipient humanities.

Among those numerous groups was Semprônius, who, before incarnating, had bid farewell to Cáius Lucílius.

- I'm afraid - he repeated - I'm going to let myself get carried away once again by material interests, since I'm going to be linked to Livia again, but having as children the beings you know... And will they be able to love us as they should? And will we, in turn, know how to love them by means of a deep affection that identifies us and obscures the past? And Nero, my son again, will I be able to keep him and lead him on the path of goodness?

- I promised him support and I think that this time he will find a father's heart and arms - answered Cáius. - Courage, my old and faithful friend, you'll do your duty, since Nero has also tried to improve himself and is possessed of the best intentions.

Then comes the Spirit of Nero, also afflicted, and agitated.

- Oh, Cáius, I now gladly recognize your superiority; I want to fight valiantly for the new faith, which will allow me to come closer to you. Help me not to fail, not to experience for the beauty of your soul that old hatred that your physical gifts inspired in me. I see, I feel that your forgiveness is sincere, but, even so, I may stumble, and if I lack the flame to light the way, then, it is seen, I'll roll down into the abyss of a useless existence, because, in lying to my own conscience, I can only be a false priest in the office of Good and Truth.

- My brother, remember that my voice can only be heard subtly, faintly, and that, on the other hand, human passions will roar in your core; but as far as I can, I'll help you, I'll try to enlighten your soul. Your father, to whom you must bring the truth through the spiritualist belief, will also be a support to you on earth.

- I know this, and yet I tremble; but if I falter, if I allow myself to be led astray by perfidious inspirations; if, obliterated by the flesh, harassed by enemies visible and invisible (Cláudius will incarnate beside me), I don't stand firm and turn away from the light, who but you, Cáius, can help me?

- Besides, the one to whom it's up to me to offer salvation, that one, I sense, will support you - said Semprônius brightly.

- Oh! - replied Nero - already in a state of great agitation, your inflexible spirit, which is more bent than twisted, will perhaps find no

breach in my heart. You'll be able to recruit beggars from the street to benefit them, but the spiritual beggar who will be your son, you'll give him to himself in his moral struggle and you'll possibly say to him, "you wanted it that way". Will you throw your gold at me again, instead of giving me indulgent, fatherly affection? Will you be able to support the prodigal son in his weakness? Repelled from men I've offended, will you love me enough to lead me back to the path of truth? No, certainly not, for I foresee that our hatred will rekindle to asphyxiate all the good feelings and generous aspirations that we will also cherish. But at least you, Cáius, will not withdraw from me?

The remote converted "father" John sighed deeply.

- Do you think my task is easy? Do you see this phalanx of Spirits that are gradually incarnating to progress, clearing the ground for the germination of the spiritualist truths? Among this mass, how many hate each other? How many shy, pre-sunny, envious intelligences? Well, because of the heavy mission I've asked for, all these beings will come to me for advice, moral help in short; blind in the flesh, they will not know me, but I'll recognize them through the carnal mask, with all the vices and faults, ingratitude, and cowardice with which they will repay my devotion. And in this enervating fight with boastful incredulity, full of human vile deceptions, it is up to me to be calm, indulgent, equanimous, as the truth itself proclaims. I shall be the friend, the counselor, the consoler of all those who appeal to me, be they friends or enemies, serving all of them as a humble worker, and even though I'm certain to have slander and betrayal as my sole reward... I repeat: this task will be rude, dangerous even for my temperament. So, my friend, don't make it worse. For the rest, my brother, whatever the future may be, and even if, stimulated by old hostilities, you should separate yourself from me and from the group I lead, don't consider such a desertion as decisive for your faith. Man may at any time stumble and fall, but he always tends to get up and reach the truth in another direction. God is in everything and everywhere, and it isn't men, in and of themselves, that make Spiritism, but their conviction and their deeds. Remember that, divorced on Earth, we always end up meeting again here.

From the phalanx preparing to incarnate, a large group surrounded the Spirit of Cáius, begging him for support, in view of his weaknesses and past falls. This group included Cláudius, Túlia, Tibério, Dafné and many others.

The divine fire of charity, the desire to repair past mistakes by improving his fellow men, filled the ardent and generous soul of the one who had been Cáius Lucílius with light.

- Yes! I want to forgive you all for the sufferings you've inflicted on me, raising high the flame of Truth, pressing the cross to my breast - symbol of eternity and redemption - I want to teach everyone the good, open their eyes to the faults committed, show them the path to perfection. Through word, pen, and deeds, I'll prove to you the existence of the beyond-tomb and convince you of the immortality of the soul; I'll work tirelessly to clear and clarify your path.

All those who come to Rochester will find in him a help, a tireless counselor, be they friends or enemies. As for you, Dafné, I need to say a few words in particular: - all your incarnations have been nothing more than a web of ignominies, of sensuality, of stubborn stubbornness. Incarnating successively Radamés, Dafné, Court, you have always shown yourself ungrateful, disloyal, perjured towards me; and, nevertheless, the affection you've inspired in me has not yet been exhausted. I consider you, then, as a counterweight to the baggage of perfidy, ingratitude, and hatred which I must carry about everywhere. You know that the high Spirits who were the judges of your last incarnation saw fit to impose on you a life of misery and humiliation... I took pity on you, I pulled you out of the quagmire, I offered to be your guarantor, and thanks to this, I obtained living conditions that, if you're faithful to me, will make you progress without so much suffering. So, make more sense now: if once again you betray my trust and complicate the task, I'll abandon you definitively to your enemies and, therefore, to a just expiation which, by its greater harshness, can overcome your evil passions. Assuming the responsibility for your progress and convinced that only suffering and misfortune can tame you, I'll watch over you and, as tenacious as you've been in your ingratitude and wickedness, I'll be as tenacious in the exactness of your expiatory trials, I'll spare you neither tears nor moral pains that will purify you.

"Reflect, therefore, while it is still time. If you feel weak, give up this incarnation and go prepare better for another, which your judges will point out to you."

Dafné's spirit stirred restlessly:

- I swear to you love, fidelity, and obedience in everything - he murmured, but without ceasing to think, with the rapidity of lightning, that it had always been preferable to be able to dodge, for the moment, to have a leisurely life under the aegis of a protector whose efficiency and goodness he had already experienced so many times.

In the times propitious to the advent of Spiritism, it would even be of the greatest convenience to link herself to fortune, thus becoming a sort of privileged alphenim of a powerful Spirit like Rochester,

because of his energy and intellectual development, and whose work could even produce that fascinating metal which she, Dafné, in all her earthly stages had been accustomed to squander.

And even if she were to weaken and betray Rochester's trust, had he not forgiven her a hundred times for the vilest perjury? I could count on his unfailing indulgence. Like every backward and cowardly spirit, Dafné was incapable of probing a soul like that of his protector, to assess the limits of his patience, and, in the ardor of his conjectures, he didn't realize that a superior intelligence was reading his mind.

- You're wrong, and this time you'll have to settle accounts with the hotelier," replied Cáius, or Rochester (whatever we want to call him). If you betray me, I'll have more than a personal offense to punish. I've taken it upon myself to watch over your evolution, and I shall bring you back, regenerated, before your judges. Definitely convinced that you're one of those students who don't benefit from soft methods, I'll not hesitate to become the harsh mentor you claim.

And after exchanging a final sympathetic thought with Semprônius, he rose up, disappeared into space...

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More than half a century had passed on Earth since the astral meeting we have just described.

Almost all those Spirits who had been summoned to bear witness of solidarity, consequent to the resolutions already taken, were now incarnated.

The time had also come for Cáius Lucílius to fulfill his mission of work and abnegation.

Followed by a host of devoted friends, but also by helpless enemies, he came down from the infinite regions, the home of the liberated, to begin his heavy task in the thick earthly atmosphere.

Dense, reddish fluids, furrowed with electric sparks, enveloped him as if in an igneous globe: it was the planetary material destined to reconnect him to his mediums and to the material environment in which he was to operate.

At his side floated a Spirit, whose luminous diaphanousness attested to the highest moral hierarchy.

- Is it not true, wise, and courageous master, that you'll support me in this heavy task? I know well what faults and falls I must voluntarily redeem; and yet, at the last minute, I feel cowardly, hesitant,

fearful. Encourage me, master! Will I've the patience to remain a faithful herald of truth among pre-sunny, perfidious men, galvanized into incredulity by material pleasures? Oh! if I could be a poet, write with characters of fire the dramas of the past, enlighten the incarnate about life beyond the grave... Then, I think, nothing would tarnish the limpidity of my work... But bound to men, involved in their fights, interests and ignominies, will I not allow myself to be haunted and impassioned by the inclinations of my enraptured spirit, to the point of hating and punishing, as has already happened to me? Now, Father Amenófis, I often think that, when I was incarnating the personality of Mernéphta, you were constantly telling me that every man who atrophies and debases, measuring a materialistic existence, the divine principle that distinguishes him, can be equated with the animal. Do we not see, at the present time, thousands of creatures who, perverted in atheism, blinded by a ridiculous pride, greedy for wealth and pleasures, lead an instinctive existence of irrationals?

How to conquer them? How to find the clue to their souls? You yourself, you, worthy centurion who not long ago was Allan Kardec; you who in the last incarnation devoted yourself to the foundation of a doctrine that enlightens and consoles humanity, how many troubles have you not bitterly regretted?

- Don't worry, my catechumen of old; - the task you now undertake is heavy, but also too noble and beautiful to devote all the energies of your resolute and hardworking spirit to it. To work in the great work of the regeneration of humanity, demonstrating to it, with uncontested proofs, the immortality and responsibility of the thinking being, is a mission worthy of every generous spirit. Think about it, my friend, and you'll find energy to dominate your violent impulses, and your word will touch and soften the hearts hardened in the flesh. Will I need to assure you of my help? No. Nevertheless, many disappointments await you, many desertions which, it must be said, should not discourage you, for every work that takes place among men is fragile and subject to a thousand vicissitudes. What does it matter? The eternal and the true always triumph in the end.

Look at my earthly work, in which I've operated with all possible prudence and discernment, to give it a solid foundation, grounded in truth. Well, since my disincarnating - and very recently - how many deniers, detractors and accusers have there been, intending to remake, amend, improve, and even change the principles of this work? Am I discouraged or saddened by this? No, no, because in those points where, perhaps, and despite my good will, I've erred as a man, the truth will always stand out, and what is true, and eternal will

remain impregnable, superior to all attacks. So, my friend, go to work, too, without rushing or fading, go on and complete my work.

As he spoke, a more and more intense light, reflecting generous resolutions, bathed the perispirit of Cáius Lucílius.

- Yes, as always, you're right: - I'll work, I'll strive to dominate myself, to benefit Humanity, to continue your work; I'll vow to propagate your doctrine in all its genuineness, with all the strength of my soul and the resources of my intelligence; I'll fight unrelentingly for the postulates of truth that you've proclaimed, and the Creator of all things will support me and bless my efforts and sorrows.

A jet of fire spurted from the two Spirits and belted them in a warm embrace. Then, Kardec's Spirit ascended to the infinite paramos.

Always animated by the generous enthusiasm he had just experienced, Cáius Lucílius (Rochester) continued, with his companions, to approach the Earth. Very soon he caught sight of a large city whose streets and houses were covered with a sheet of snow. He then launched luminous streaks into space, which attracted and connected him more with creatures who could scarcely suspect his invisible presence. Finally, he stopped in front of a vast building with a bronze eagle at the door, with its wings spread out, serving as a symbol of protection to those who took shelter there for the study and development of progress.

Casting a melancholy glance around, the spiritual visitor entered a dimly lit room. In rows of parallel beds, young, entirely unconcerned creatures slept.

It was New Year's Eve, the inmates were trying to read their fortunes, which mortals always find so curious, precisely because they don't know them.

The place in front of the mirror was, at that moment, occupied by a young girl, pink, with childish features, whose brown hair fell softly over her naked shoulders. Her large, blue eyes, strangely bright, radiated hope, a naive optimism of humanity and of life.

But, at the same instant, a jet of fire penetrated her body, flexing her heart. She shuddered, her gaze clouded, and, pale, she pressed her breast with her hands. The presentiment of the trials that this favor from heaven would bring made her let out a deep sigh. The Spirit had just connected with her medium, and at the same time gave her the intuition of the spite, hatred, and jealousy that her work would arouse among men.

Entangled, constrained by the ring of fire, the girl got up in a bad mood and threw herself on the bed. Rochester sprayed a stream of

fluids over her, and soon her numbness was transformed into a restful sleep.

"Rest, child, until such time as we shall open the fight for the truth. This will make it possible for me to make you calm, courageous, forgiving, since the present life is a battlefield, whose consequences can only be assessed in death...

This he muttered, as he soared into space, obsessing in fiery prayer:

"Almighty God, support me, sustain me in the task I've set myself."

ROCHESTER

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Notes

[←1]

John Huss, burned at the stake in Constance in 1415.

[←2]

See chapters I and XII, "On the Road to the Light", by Emmanuel, through Francisco Cândido Xavier. Publisher's note (FEB) in 1975.

[←3]

A kind of car like that of the times of Louis XIV.

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